CHUMS OF THE CAMP FIRE

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BY

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CHUMS OF THE CAMPFIRE

CHAPTER I

THE FROG HUNTERS

"How many greenback saddles does that last bullfrog Max shot make, Toby?"

"T-t-t-thirteen, all t-t-told, Steve."

"Ginger! that's going some for so early in the spring season, isn't it? I'd like to get about twenty before we quit, which would make just five for each of us, Max, Bandy-legs, you and myself. And seems like we ought to knock over seven more this Saturday afternoon."

"Say, if only we were up in that old Dismal Swamp where I got lost last year, I bet you we could fill a bushel basket with big bullfrog saddles," remarked the third boy, whose lower limbs were a little inclined to grow in the shape of bows and who had on that account always gone by the significant name of "Bandy-legs" Griffin among his comrades.

"Well, the less you have to say about that time the better," remarked the fourth of the squad, a bright-faced young chap who was looked upon as a born leader, no matter whether on the field of

sport as known to the boys of Carson, or in camp, and whose name was Max Hastings; "because you gave us a pretty bad scare the time we had to rush up there and hunt that swamp through to find you. Back up, Steve; easy now, I tell you!"

"Do you see the fourteenth victim crouching in the shallow water, or squatting up on the bank?" whispered the boy who just then held the little Flobert rifle, with which the so-called "game" was being bagged.

"Yes, and he must be the grand-daddy of the whole shooting match, he's so *enor*mously big. Look at that log lying on the shore, just where the ice pushed it last winter. Don't you see a bunch of grass at the further end? Well, he's alongside that, and I reckon he hears us talking, for he looks wise and ready to plop into the water. Steady now, Touch-and-go Steve; make sure before you shoot."

Steve Dowdy, though warm-hearted, and a mighty good comrade, was inclined to be rather excitable at times, and on this account he had been dubbed "Touch-and-go Steve," a name that seemed peculiarly appropriate.

"I see the old rascal, all right," he murmured, as he slowly began to raise the little rifle to his shoulder, and take aim; "and let me tell you he's my meat. I've got a dead bead on him right now. Listen, fellows!"

The sharp, spiteful snap of the Flobert rifle followed. Then Bandy-legs gave a victorious crow,

just as though he might have been a barnyard rooster returning to his own dung-heap after whipping the next-door neighbor's game fowl.

"That settled his hash for him, all right, and a fine shot for you, Steve. Now hand me the gun, for it's my turn next; and go and retrieve your game."

"You'll have to pick your way around there carefully, Steve," Max went on to caution, as he observed how the pond shore took several twists in that particular place, making it difficult to reach the spot where the monster greenback lay extended at full length, a prize worth risking much for.

"Oh! that's all right, Max; leave it to me. I wouldn't lose that buster, even if I had to strip, and swim over, with the water as cold as anything, because this is only Easter time."

With these words the late marksman started to make his way along the edge of the pond where their hunt was taking place, and which lay not more than a mile from the town of Carson, in which all of them had their homes.

While Steve is doing this, and Bandy-legs is making the rifle ready for further use by inserting a fresh cartridge in place of the empty shell, a few words of explanation with regard to these four boys may seem appropriate.

They were boon companions, and together had been having some great times during the past two years, many of these happenings having been de-

scribed at length in the preceding books of this series.

One of their earlier achievements is worthy of mention, because it supplied the sinews of war, in the shape of money, through the possession of which they were enabled to carry out many of their plans, which might otherwise never have materialized through sheer lack of means to pay expenses.

Knowing that there were plenty of fresh-water clams called mussels in some of the waters adjacent to Carson, these boys, together with Owen Hastings, a cousin of Max, now visiting an old aunt abroad, who wanted to adopt him, had made a secret investigation.

Max had been reading about the wonderful find of pearls in mussels picked up in the streams in Missouri, Indiana and other places, and he conceived the idea that possibly those in the smaller tributaries of the Evergreen River, flowing past the home town, might yield something worth while.

Accordingly he and his four chums, without saying a word to anybody, had gone into camp on the Big Sunflower River, and commenced their pearl hunting operations.

The result made a tremendous flurry around that whole vicinity, for the wideawake lads found quite a lot of valuable pearls in the heaps of mussels which they gathered along the little stream.

Of course once the news leaked out everybody

hastened to glean a fortune in the pearl line; but the boys laughed in their sleeves, knowing full well that they had "skimmed the cream off the pan." True, a few gems were found, but nothing to compare with their rake-off. And as the supply of mussels soon became exhausted the flurry had long since died a natural death.

But the boys had a nice little nest-egg in the bank as the result of their thrift, and knowledge of things. This had been added to in various ways, such as combing the woods far and near in search of wild ginseng, and golden seal, the roots of which, when properly dried, brought them many good dollars, after being shipped to a responsible house that dealt in furs, and such things that the woods produce.

On the preceding fall the boys had enjoyed their Thanksgiving holidays up in the North Woods in company with an old friend who spent all his time there, trapping wild animals in season for their pelts, and getting close to Nature's heart; for Trapper Jim, although well-to-do after a fashion, despised the artificial life of the town.

Here they had experienced a succession of adventures that would forever keep the memory of that trip fresh in their minds. Toby Jucklin had brought home a 'coon he had captured; while Bandy-legs was the proud owner of a fast growing black bear cub, which was making life miserable for the cook at his house, because of its mischievous ways, and enormous appetite.

Toby had apparently gone head-over-heels into the "pet" business. That lively and prankish 'coon seemed to have started him along the line of owning pets, and his comrades many times declared that he would soon have a regular menagerie in the back yard of his place; for already there were half a dozen home-made cages there, and Toby spent much of his spare time feeding his pets.

Besides that same 'coon, which was often at large, yet never seemed desirous of heading back to his old haunts where dinners were hard to secure, Toby had some weird-looking lop-eared rabbits; a bunch of quail from which he hoped to raise a family later on; a red fox that had a limp on account of the broken leg set by Toby after he had found the little animal apparently dying from hunger in the bitter wintry storm; and last but not least a small edition of a wildcat that never would make up with the hand that fed it, but continued to snarl and spit and look ferocious week after week, until even patient Toby was beginning to despair of ever calling it a "pet."

Some of the others had even begun to call Toby the "menagerie man," because of this inordinate love for pets. They said he dreamed every night of going out to Africa or India, and collecting wild animals for the various zoological gardens of the country.

Toby's parents allowed him to do about as he pleased. No doubt they expected to see this pres-

ent fad run its course, and that some new notion would eventually displace it. They knew that boys must have a hobby of some sort. With one it may be a mania for collecting things in the line of autographs or postage stamps; while another may start to stuff birds, secure all sorts of eggs, make fishing rods, take pictures with a modern little kodak camera, or one of dozens of other things that are apt to appeal to the modern lad.

Toby was afflicted with a bad case of stammering, that of course struck him harder whenever he chanced to be laboring under excitement. There were times, however, when Toby surprised his chums by talking as plainly and steadily as any one of them could do. Though these lapses were but temporary, and he would fall back into the old miserable rut again, at least they gave hope that in time the boy might control himself, and fling off the habit for good.

The four chums had been making ready to spend their Easter holidays in the woods, so as to have a breath of the open after a severe winter. Easter came unusually late that year, and the spring had already advanced very far, so that leaves were beginning to appear on the forest trees far ahead of the usual time.

Just to get their hands in the boys had started out on this Saturday to see how the frog supply promised. All of them were exceedingly fond of fried frogs' legs, which they declared beat any spring chicken ever hatched. And since there

were already thirteen plump white "saddles," as the two attached hind-legs are called, in the basket, it began to look as though something like a feast would follow, at a number of Carson houses.

While Steve was making his way around the little bayou in the pond, intent on securing his prize, which promised to excel in size any of those they had already "dressed," the other three started to talk over their plans for the little vacation in the woods.

There never were four boys who got more benefit out of an outing than these Carson lads. They planned for it far in advance, and enjoyed this part of the excursion almost as much as the thing itself. Max Hastings knew so many things in connection with the woods; and they had also picked up such a world of information when spending those halcyon days up with old Trapper Jim, that it made it unusually pleasant when they were in camp, trying out new ideas, and copying others which they had watched the woodsman do.

"Have a care, Steve!" Max called out, as the one who was making his way around the little bayou slipped, and splashed the water in his eagerness to accomplish the errand that had taken him there; "you'll get a ducking yet if you don't slow up some! Rome wasn't built in a day, remember!"

"Yes," added Toby, "and you b-b-bet the w-w-water's c-c-cold right now! Don't I k-k-know when I p-p-put my hand in?"

"Oh! don't bother your heads about me," sang out Touch-and-go Steve, carelessly; "I guess I c'n look out for myself all right. One more turn and I'll be there. And I c'n see your eyes stickin' out of your heads when you handle this gi-*gan*tic frog of mine! Wow! but he is a whopper, though!"

He seemed so eager to lay hands on his prize, just as though the big greenback might recover, and hop into the pond before his very eyes, that possibly Steve was not quite as careful as his boastful words would indicate.

"I don't know about taking any frog legs home this time," Bandy-legs was saying, in a half regretful tone; "our girl says she won't cook the same, and my folks seem like they was set against frog for eatin'. Now I like 'em first-rate, but you see I've just got to keep on the good side of our cook, 'cause she gives me lots of scraps for my pet cub. And if that cute little bungler don't improve pretty soon, I just don't know what I'm agoin' to do with him. He makes us so much trouble all the time, playin' his innocent pranks, but scarin' the cook half out of her seven senses."

Thereupon Toby became tremendously excited, and pawed at the sleeve of Bandy-legs eagerly, while as soon as he could control his lips and his vocal chords he started in to say:

"Oh! g-g-give him to me, won't you, Bandy-legs? I'd be the happiest fellow you ever s-s-saw if I had a real live b-b-bear of my own. S-s-say, just name your p-p-price, and if I've g-g-got any-

thing you want right b-b-bad it's yours. That c-c-cook of yours is set against p-p-poor Nicodemus, who c-c-came in the night, and was g-given that name. Think it over, Bandy-legs."

The other looked at the eager speaker, and grinned.

"Perhaps I may, Toby," he remarked, slowly; "anyhow, I'll promise to keep you in mind, and if I do want to get shut of Nicodemus you'll have first chance. It's goin' to be money in my pocket if I do let him go, because he costs me like anything. Oh! listen to Steve, would you; he's sure enough gone and fallen in, after all your warnin' him to go slow!"

It seemed to be just as Bandy-legs said, if one could judge from the tremendous amount of splashing that came to their ears, Steve being shut out from their view temporarily by a thick clump of alders that grew on the brink of a little trickling stream emptying into the pond just there.

"Let's hurry around and see if he needs any help!" suggested Max.

"He'll be shivering in the cold, even after he crawls out," said Bandy-legs; "and we'll have to see that he gets dried off. We're following at your heels, Max!"

"S-s-sure we are!" added Toby, who just then happened to be carrying the basket in which reposed the hind-quarters of all their previous greenback victims.

CHAPTER II

STEVE PLAYS HERO

"We're coming to the rescue, Steve! Keep a stiff upper-lip, old chum! Hold up, and we'll help you climb out, Steve!"

Bandy-legs was shouting cheerfully in this strain as he hurried after Max, with slower Toby bringing up the rear. The splashing had entirely ceased by this time, which would indicate that there must have been a change in conditions.

"Say, you ain't drowned, are you, Steve?" Bandy-legs continued, as though gripped by a sudden dreadful fear.

Max turned and called back over his shoulder.

"I can hear water dripping like everything, and I guess he's gone and crawled out on the bank all right!"

"Sure I have," said Steve just then from behind the bushes; "and I've got that frog, too. He's worth taking a ducking for, let me tell you. There never was such a buster of a greenback croaker. If you could hear him sing out 'more r-rum! more r-rum!' you'd think it was a bass drum arollin'. Here I am, fellows, dripping wet in the bargain. I must have slipped, I reckon."

When Max came upon the speaker, and sur-

veyed his soaked figure, he burst into a shout of laughter.

"Well, I should think you did slip!" he exclaimed; "you're always slipping, seems like, Steve, and it's because you're in such an awful hurry to do things that you get into a muss. You certainly are a sight now, with all that mud on you. If pretty Bessie French could only see you I can fancy her nose would go up in the air, because that mud isn't as sweet as violets or roses, Steve."

"Well, what's done can't be undone, they say!" declared the other, with a reckless laugh, which was Steve all over; "better luck next time, I say. Here, Toby, what d'ye think of that for a saddle? Do the needful to him, won't you please, for I've got to scrape some of this nasty black muck off my trousers legs?"

"Here, this won't do, Steve," observed Max, severely; "you're beginning to shiver right now, and it'll get worse before long. You're soaked to the skin, chances are. It might be all well enough in the good old summer-time to let your duds dry on you, but not in this raw April weather. We've got to postpone the balance of our frog hunt, and make a fire."

"What for?" asked Steve, petulantly, because he did not much fancy allowing the others to make him out to be a weakling.

"To dry your clothes, if you must know it; and we won't take no for an answer either, eh,

boys?'' and Max winked toward the other two, who immediately chimed in vociferously to echo his sentiments.

''Oh! well, have it your way,'' grumbled Steve, though there was a gleam in his eyes that showed how he secretly appreciated this solicitude over his health displayed by his chums. ''P'raps I will feel some better if I get dried out. I had a cough last winter that worried my folks, and mebbe I shouldn't take chances.''

''Come along this way and we'll soon have a jolly blaze started,'' said Max, who was accustomed to acting as leader, though never at any time becoming officious to an extent that might be displeasing.

There was plenty of good wood handy, and certainly those lads knew every little trick connected with building fires; so that in a very short time the cheery flames were jumping merrily upward, and a genial warmth was disseminated that felt unusually pleasant to the boy who had commenced shivering in his wet clothes.

''Now peel off right away, and we'll see about drying your duds!'' Max told him.

''Y-y-you might p-p-put on my sweater while we're d-d-doing the same,'' added Toby, who was as generous a boy as could be found in a day's journey afield.

''That's kind of you, Toby, and if you think you won't need it right away, guess I ought to accept. You see I ain't used to prancing around in

April without my clothes on. Hang it on that branch, Max; it'll be close enough to steam without getting scorched. How long will it take to dry my shirt out, d'ye think?"

"Oh! perhaps only a matter of fifteen minutes or so," replied the other, as he proceeded to arrange all the other belongings of the unlucky chum on adjacent bushes until, as Bandy-legs declared, it looked like an "Irish wash-day."

Having donned Toby's gray sweater Steve did not feel so badly. He kept turning around by the fire, first warming one side and then the other, and all the while dancing up and down so as to keep his blood in good circulation; for Max had told him to do this, and surely Max knew what was best.

Toby kept the fire going by feeding fresh fuel from time to time. A fire was one of the things Toby certainly loved. Whenever he took the time to ponder over past events that had marked the companionship of these four lads, the various campfires they had shared in common stood out as oases in a desert. Toby was apt to figure past happenings as connected with the time "we had that dandy blaze under the twisted hemlock"; or "that night I built the champion cooking fire any campers ever had along."

By degrees Steve's apparel dried sufficiently for him to get into it again. He did not look very spruce and clean though, after his recent immersion, for the mud had dried. Steve had the

appearance of a tramp, as Bandy-legs assured him, knowing that the other was as a rule addicted to taking especial pains with his clothes, pressing them out every week so that the creases would show at the proper angles, and all that nonsense.

"Well, when we get home it's apt to be dusk, anyway," said reckless Steve; "and we won't be meeting up with anybody on the road. If we do I'll dodge in the bushes till they get past. But notice that I got what I went after, boys!"

That was generally the main thing with Steve, to get what he went after, no matter how strenuous a time he experienced in accomplishing his aim. With him the end always justified the means. And looking back over the experiences of the last two years his chums could remember many times when this ambition carried the impetuous one into a heap of trouble, from which he was rescued only after considerable difficulty.

After Steve had fully dressed the four comrades started out once more, bent on following the shore of the big pond the balance of the way around, so as to pot such other incautious frogs as might have been tempted by the brightness of the day to mount the bank, and bask in the sunshine.

"This fine weather isn't going to stay with us, I'm afraid, boys," Max remarked, as they went on, Bandy-legs in advance, for it was his next turn with the target rifle.

"What makes you say that, Max?" demanded Steve, a little testily.

"Well, in the first place there's a queer feeling in the air that seems to tell of a storm coming along," replied the other; "then if you look away over to the southwest you'll see a low bank of clouds. There's some wind in that bunch of clouds if I know anything about weather signs. And besides the paper said we'd have a blow some time soon."

"Hope she gets over with before next week, when we want to hike up into the woods for our first camp this season; that's all I can say," Bandy-legs observed over his shoulder, for he could hear what his chums were talking about, being only a short distance ahead of them, though closer to the shore of the pond.

"C-c-cracky!" burst out Toby, his face taking on an agonized look, as though a sudden thought had struck him, and brought pain.

"What ails you now, Toby?" demanded Steve.

"Why, I was thinking of the c-c-circus that's expectin' to d-d-drop into Carson around about m-m-midnight, that's what!"

"Say, that's a fact," Steve added; "they are showing this afternoon and to-night over at Bloomingdale, and a train will fetch the lot to Carson right after the last performance. If it storms they'll have a warm session getting the cages of animals and the performing elephants off the cars."

"I thought s-s-some of s-s-staying up and g-g-goin' down to see the animals come to t-t-town," admitted Toby; and of course none of the others saw anything wonderful about that, knowing his great love for animals as they did; though Bandy-legs did see fit to try and josh him a little when he saw the chance.

"You certainly missed the biggest thing of your life when you didn't hire out to old Noah," he told Toby. "Just think what a treat it'd been to him, fellers, to stand there and check off all the animals big and little as they walked aboard the ark in pairs, the elephant and the kangaroo, and the little monkey too. But a measly storm oughtn't to keep you at home, Toby."

"But they won't get in till near two in the morning, I'm told," protested Toby; "and I guess my folks'd put the kibosh on my staying out that late on a stormy night."

"Hurrah! did you hear him say all that without a single stagger?" cried the boy with the bow-legs; "wisht my troubles'd be as easy to drop as his stuttering is. But mine stick with me all the time."

"There's a good place ahead of you, Bandy-legs," advised Max; "now show us what you can do. Steve is high notch so far with his gi-*gan*tic mastodon frog. Beat him out at his little game, Bandy-legs, if you can."

The boy with the target rifle quickly added another victim to those whose prized hinder quar-

ters lay in a heap in the trout basket Toby had slung over his shoulder.

"That makes fifteen, and only five more to get to cover the twenty," Steve announced; "but if they were all whoppers like mine, say, the basket wouldn't be big enough to hold them, I reckon."

The hunt went on, and by the time the sun had passed pretty well down the western sky, heading for the black bank of clouds that lay menacingly there, the frog hunters had completed the circuit of the big pond. They had exceeded their expectations also, for several beyond the score had been bagged.

"A good afternoon's work, I take it," remarked Steve, who was feeling very well satisfied, because he had secured the biggest frog ever seen in that part of the country, the patriarch of the lot apparently; nor did the fact that his face was still streaked with dried mud, and his clothes looked like those of a common hobo, seem to detract from his bubbling joy.

They started for home along the road that led to Carson. This was something of a favorite highway, and they were apt to meet various vehicles while tramping over the mile and a half that separated them from home.

Just as he had said he would do, whenever they chanced to meet a carriage Steve proved quick to dodge into the scrub, and after the danger had passed overtake his companions by hurrying. Steve was always good at hurrying; it

was his favorite way of doing things, and nothing pleased him better than a chance to sprint, in order to come up with his mates.

They had perhaps covered half of the journey, and the church spires of Carson could be easily seen in the near distance when all at once they noticed a horse and buggy coming at a lively clip along the road.

"Looks like a runaway!" snapped Steve.

"It sure does," admitted Bandy-legs, "and what d'ye think of that, if the girl in the same ain't Bessie French I'll eat my hat!"

"W-what!" almost roared the now excited Steve, stopping in his intention to beat a hasty retreat, the neighboring bushes offering a splendid asylum.

"It's Bessie, all right," said Max; "but about her being run away with, I'm not so sure, because she knows how to handle horses first rate; and that old Bill of the Frenchs' never was known to cut up before."

But Steve apparently did not hear a single word that Max said. He was quivering with eagerness, and a wild desire to distinguish himself as a hero, in the eyes of the pretty girl whom he had been taking to barn dances and such for two whole seasons, and with whom he had lately had a little falling out.

He brushed his long football hair away from his eyes, and looked again. Yes, old Bill must have taken the bit between his teeth, if he had

any left, and was renewing his youthful days; for they used to tell great stories about his having once upon a time been a clever race horse—about thirty-odd years ago, some people put it.

Steve started to run along the road. He had undoubtedly mapped out the whole affair in his mind, like a good general, and cared not what risks he assumed if only he might pull that galloping horse in, so as to save the fair girl.

Max was shouting something to him from away back in the rear, but it was surely no time to stop and listen now, when a human life, and a precious one to Steve, might lie in the balance.

He may have wondered why a girl as sensible as Bessie French should persist in standing erect in the vehicle, and also what business she had to be holding that whip. Steve did not take the trouble to ask himself these bothersome questions. He knew that real heroes *act* while other people are figuring things out. He must run alongside that rushing horse, until he could jump up, seize the reins close to the bit and then throw his whole weight so as to bring the animal to a stop.

Well, Steve really managed to do this in a way that should have won for him considerable credit. He got more or less knocking around before he could curb the fiery steed; but what should he care so long as his object was accomplished. When he had brought old Bill to a complete standstill, he meant to assist the almost fainting girl to the ground, and then perhaps she would

tell him how brave he was, and what a fool she had been to quarrel with him.

He heard her calling out excitedly to him, but supposed Bessie might naturally be anxious about his safety, dear girl.

Steve finally managed to bring old Bill to a stand; and it was wonderful how quickly all the spirit went out of the ancient horse once he felt the hand of a *master* at the rein.

As the heroic rescuer turned around he was staggered to see the pretty face of Bessie French clouded with a frown, and to hear her bitterly tell him how silly he had been to stop her in that way.

"Why, don't you see I was only trying to prove to Mazie Dunkirk that our old Bill still had some fire left in him!" she cried, with tears of mortification in her voice. "She said he couldn't run all the way to the cross-roads and back again in seven minutes, and I just knew he could. But now you've stopped us, and I've lost a candy pull. If some people only knew enough to attend to their own affairs it would be better for them. Please let go of that bridle; I want to go on!"

CHAPTER III

WHEN DREAMS CAME TRUE

Steve seemed turned into a pillar of stone. He stood there, and just stared as hard as he could at the girl in the buggy. His hand though released its clutch upon the reins, and the girl, plying the whip on old Bill, swept past, giving him one last scornful look as she went; for indeed the usually elegant Steve must have impressed her as having taken to the life of a tramp, he was so soiled and streaked.

Max and Toby and Bandy-legs had listened, and also stared. They grinned of course when they realized how their brave companion's efforts were wasted on the desert air; but did not say a single word as they walked on, and overtook the dazed Steve, still standing there as though hardly able as yet to figure it out.

He managed to grin a little himself, even while rubbing his elbow, where it may have been knocked by the shaft of the vehicle at the time he made that gallant upward jump.

"Huh! seemed like it wasn't a runaway after all!" he told them; "but how was anybody to know about that, when it had all the earmarks of one? I never waited to ask, but saw my duty and did

it. Lots of thanks I got, didn't I? It'll likely be some time before Steve Dowdy bothers himself to stop horses again at the risk of his own life. Why, she looked like she could *eat* me when she drove off. A fellow's a fool to think a girl could appreciate a job like that. Huh!"

"Never mind, Steve," said Max, throwing an arm over the shoulder of his friend; "we know that if it had been a sure-enough runaway you'd have covered yourself with glory, and saved her life in the bargain. Who'd ever expect girls to be wagering candy pulls about an old nag making time? And anybody to see old Bill tearing along would say he was running away. It's all right, Steve; forget it now. You made a great stop, there's no getting around that."

"I should say he did!" added Bandy-legs; "and when Bessie comes to think of how you risked your precious life, just because you *thought* she was in danger, why, I don't see how she can help but feel sorry for being so sharp with her tongue. But then all girls think of is candy-pulls, dancin' and such things as dress. Nope, it don't pay for a feller to play the hero any more. You wouldn't ketch me adoin' it, for a fact."

Toby started to say something that may have had to do with his opinion concerning the impossibility of any one built like Bandy-legs being agile enough to run alongside a racing horse; but he made such a mess of it, or else on second thought felt it would be mean to say it, for he

stopped short, gulped several times, and relapsed into silence.

Sometimes that affliction of Toby's saved him from getting into trouble and controversies, which proved that it was after all not an unmixed evil.

After that they went on toward home, chattering like a lot of magpies about the glorious times they expected having in the following week, should the weather permit of their going off to the woods, on their first outing of the season.

Before separating they divided the spoils of the frog hunt. After due consideration Bandy-legs concluded that it would be best for him not to bother his folks with any of the proceeds of the expedition to the big pond.

"I'll drop over to your house to-morrow, Toby," he said, as he handed the other his share of the trophies in the shape of five saddles, "and p'raps you'd be kind enough to save me a couple of these, no matter if they are cold. I don't dare upset our cook. She's the boss of the kitchen in our house, and if you rub her the right way you c'n get whatever you want; but she does everlastingly hate the looks of frogs' legs, and vowed the last time I fetched some home she'd leave before she cooked 'em again. Besides, mebbe next week we'll run across our fill of the same when we're campin' out, and then I can have all I want."

Toby readily agreed to this, for he was a most accommodating fellow. He even made Bandy-legs promise to eat dinner with him when the

wonderful dish of frogs' legs would be served.

"I'll have the s-s-same, even if I have to c-c-cook 'em m-m-myself!" Toby promised, in parting.

"If you look over there," remarked Max, casually, "you'll notice that bank of dark clouds has climbed up a little now. Seems like it might be going to whoop things up some before morning comes along."

"Well, it's Sunday, and all we could do would be to hang around the house, or walk down to see how the old circus was coming on," Steve observed, with the calm philosophy of a boy.

"It's going to clear the air for next week, and give us the greatest time ever," Max went on to say, in his optimistic way, for he was ever ready to see the bright side of things, and no trouble could come along but what Max quickly discovered that the gloomy cloud had a silver lining.

In this spirit the boys separated, each one heading for his particular home, for it was close on supper time; and Steve wanted to change his clothes before he allowed his folks to see him.

Toby too knew that he would have certain chores to look after connected with the feeding of his pets. He was too tender-hearted a boy to let them go hungry when it could be helped; and besides, his mother always insisted that if he must keep such a little menagerie in the back yard he should always have the place tidied up,

and under no circumstances allow his captives to suffer from lack of attention on his part.

The 'coon was glad to see him, and even allowed Toby to pat his sleek back, although the boy could remember many occasions in the past when he had been nipped by those sharp teeth, or else felt the angry animal's claws.

His red fox was also very tame, and would eat out of his hand, though Toby did not dare let him loose, even with a chain like that holding the 'coon, for fear of losing him.

Even the wildcat seemed to be pretty friendly on this occasion, and growled in a lower key than usual when Toby was pushing the meat scraps through the openings between the bars of its cage.

Toby was mentally exulting in the possibility that his collection might soon be added to by the coming of that partly grown black bear cub, which Bandy-legs had half promised to let him have.

He even figured out just where he would keep Nicodemus fastened, and what kind of a cage he would have to construct for him; because he had never fully liked the one now being used as a place of shelter for the cub, Bandy-legs not being much of a carpenter, to tell the truth.

It was with his mind filled with future triumphs in this line of collecting wild animals that Toby sat him down to supper that evening. He was unusually quiet, because he was thinking, and planning, and seeing visions of great things to come to pass in the distant future.

When his father asked him how the frog hunt had come out he did manage to arouse himself sufficiently to narrate some of the particulars, especially Steve's getting such a monster hermit frog, his falling into the pond, their making a fire to dry his clothes, and finally how he stopped the runaway horse under a misunderstanding and never got even so much as a word of thanks from the pretty inmate of the buggy.

Now at home, when he knew his folks were taking note of his manner of speech, it was singular how free from stuttering Toby's language could be. He just gripped himself, and was careful to speak slowly and distinctly, pronouncing every word as though he were a foreigner trying to pick up English.

And after all that is the only true way for a stammering boy to cure himself; if Toby had been as careful when among his chums as he was at home, he would have undoubtedly thrown the habit away long ago. But then there were plenty of causes for excitement in a warm baseball game, or when indulging in a swimming match, which he did not encounter at home; and this excitement was the main cause for his failure to speak distinctly.

He sat reading until it was bedtime, for he happened to have an interesting book, taken from the public library, and all about the different animals seen by a traveler in the heart of the African forest. It was highly embellished with colored pic-

tures, supposed to be produced from photographs which this daring explorer had taken while concealed near some waterhole, where the animals of the forest were in the habit of coming to drink nights, and a flashlight camera helped catch them true to nature.

All of this is told with an object in view. It would serve to explain why Toby must have dreamed that he too was a bold traveler in this foreign wilderness, and reveling in the wonderful sights to be met with there.

Once during the night he was awakened by the rush of the wind, as the storm that Max had told them would come along during the night, swooped down upon Carson to blow a few trees over, and hit the tall steeple of the Methodist church again, possibly wrecking it for the fourth time in as many years.

As Toby crawled sleepily out of bed, to close the shutters belonging to the two windows in his room that looked out on the back yard where his pets were snugly housed, he wondered whether the circus had arrived safely, and if the storm would keep them from erecting the big round-top. Fortunately they had all of Sunday to prepare for the next performance; and that would count for considerable, if repairs were necessary.

Just then, during a temporary lull in the gale, he distinctly heard the clock in the town hall tower strike three. This told him that the time fixed for the coming of the circus train had long

since passed, and that they would undoubtedly be caught unprepared by the storm.

"But then they're used to roughing it," Toby thought, without stammering either, "because circus canvas hands have to rub up against hard things wherever they go. Haven't I had one boy tell me he never knew when he was going to get his next meal, and how for a month he didn't have regular sleep, and then it was on a hard board floor mebbe. Which makes me feel thankful for such a nice soft bed, though I c'n stand it sleepin' on the bare ground, when I have to in camp."

Yawning as he told himself this, Toby stood there by the open window for a minute trying to ascertain whether he could hear a lion roar or an elephant trumpet, for that would have made his ambitious blood leap through his veins. But the noise of the storm prevented him from hearing anything else, as the rain was beating down on a tin roof near by, while the wind howled through the trees as though pursued by a legion of demons.

So presently, when Toby found himself beginning to shiver, he crawled back again between the sheets, and snuggled down, glad that he had such a comfortable nook in which to lie while things were so unpleasant without.

Once Toby managed to get to sleep and he minded nothing else that occurred. Had that furious gale whipped the roof off the house he might have aroused sufficiently to ask if the dan-

ger were very great, and upon being reassured would have again dropped off on his voyage to slumberland.

It was daylight when Toby sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes.

"Gee!" he was saying to himself, "that was a corker of a dream, all right. Why, seemed like I could see everything the animals were adoing at that same waterhole where that man took his flashlight pictures; and it was so much like the real thing I could even hear 'em carryin' on when the flash scared the bunch."

Just then he started, and sat upright, staring hard toward the nearer window, through which it seemed a queer sound had come.

Toby could not ever remember having heard such a sound in all his life; it was different from everything he had ever come across, and seemed fraught with the most alarming potentialities.

Could one of his pets be choking to death, and was that cry meant for a signal to summon him to the rescue? The thought flashed into his excited mind, causing Toby to spring from his bed like a flash, and rush over to where the closed shutters prevented a view of the back yard.

If Toby did have an impediment in his speech there was certainly nothing of that kind connected with his movements. He was known to be one of the smartest players on the high school nine; though tongue-tied, he could equal the swiftest player on the football eleven, and had more

than once claimed a share in carrying victory to the colors of Carson High.

He reached the window, and with trembling fingers fumbled at the catch, intending to throw the shutters wide open. As he was doing so he became aware of the fact that a confused jumble of mysterious sounds seemed to come floating up to him.

Toby gave his head a shake, as he again took himself to task.

"It's the old dream ahangin' on to me," he thought. "Chances are now that's only a door aswingin' in the breeze, and groanin' to beat the band; yet I'm so filled chuck full of things, because of that book, and my dream, that I'm silly enough to think I'm ahearin' wild animals asnortin' and agruntin'. Bah! get your eyes wide open, Toby Jucklin, and let up with this nonsense."

He flung open the shutters as he came to this part of hauling himself over the coals. Then he crouched there as though transfixed, hardly even drawing in a single breath. All Toby could do was to remain as though changed into a statue, and take it out in staring; though he did want to rub his eyes the worst kind, and see if the magical vision would vanish.

Indeed, there was enough reason for him to stare as though his eyes would pop out of his head. What he gazed upon might make the most sensible person believe he had been taken with

a very bad case of nightmare, and was seeing things that could exist only in dreams.

There, right in the same back yard where he had his own private little menagerie Toby was looking down upon the most remarkable collection of wild animals any boy could imagine would drop down from the clouds of a stormy night—two big elephants, and a cunning baby one in the bargain; three dromedaries, with their double humps all in place; an ostrich; a striped zebra, and last but far from least, a cowering tawny form with a shaggy mane in which Toby could recognize the king of the African forest, a male lion!

Who could blame Toby for believing that he was still dreaming as he stared out of the window of his own little second story room, and saw this wonderful array of wild beasts camped in the back yard, where up to then the fiercest captive had been his snarling wildcat, and undersized at that?

CHAPTER IV

A PROFITABLE BACK YARD

"Oh, my s-s-stars!"

That was the extent of Toby's utterance for the moment, as he remained crouched under the window, and watched that wonderful thing that had come to pass in a single night, just as though he might be living in the times of the "Arabian Nights," when magic was in vogue.

"W-w-where am I at?" he presently breathed. "W-w-what does it all m-m-mean? Has the w-w-world really turned upside d-d-down? Am I in Africa, or is this s-s-still p-p-plain old Carson, and I'm j-j-just seein' things?"

Just then the swinging trunk of the largest elephant was curled over the rim of the trough where running water passed day and night, coming through a long pipe from a distant spring; there was a strange sucking sound, then the trunk was turned upward, and a spray of water went sizzling over the great broad back of the animal.

Toby stirred himself. He could see that the camels were chewing their cud, and the ostrich pluming its ruffled feathers, while the baby elephant nosed around as though in search of breakfast. Then even the skulking tawny figure that was partly hidden under the cage containing his

wildcat moved; and he could make out the hitherto defiant inmate trying to cower against the back of the refuge as though frightened by the nearness of the king of the African jungle, the lion.

"By jinks! mebbe the circus was busted in the storm, and all the wild animals got loose!"

Why, Toby was so startled by this sudden thought, that he even neglected his customary stutter. Bandy-legs would have been quick to draw attention to this remarkable fact, had he been present to notice it, as he invariably did.

The more Toby allowed this idea to sink into his brain the stronger grew his conviction that he had really hit upon the truth. What tickled Toby most of all was the fact that the escaped animals should select *his* back yard above all other places of refuge in the good old town of Carson.

Perhaps it had happened that the gate blew open in the storm, having been insecurely fastened; and that somehow the first animal may have been attracted by the very odor of which his mother was beginning to complain, and which is always present where wild animals are kept, such as his wildcat, 'coon and fox.

Toby, however, always insisted that it must have been some instinct that caused elephants, dromedaries, ostrich, zebra and even the toothless old performing lion, Nero, to camp in his back yard in preference to any other harbor of refuge.

"Sure they knew a friend when they wanted to get in out of the wet, didn't they?" he would argue, with many a twist and turn to his speech; "animals are wise to the fact that a *few* people care for them, and I'm one of that select bunch. And you can believe that I'll always take it as one of the greatest compliments ever paid to me that they picked out the Jucklin yard to camp in!"

But Toby was not saying anything like this just at present. He knew that some energetic action must be taken in order to notify the owners of the wrecked circus where they could find a big part of their stray stock.

He tore downstairs in a great hurry, though very careful at the same time to close the shutters of his window again; for it gave him a cold chill to imagine that great yellow-maned lion scrambling up the grape-arbor near by, and finding entrance to his sleeping apartment. Toby liked wild animals all right, but he was not hankering after having them quite as close as that.

It was a quiet Sunday morning. Later on the church bells would begin to jangle and ring, but at that early hour not a sound seemed to make itself heard.

Straight to the telephone rushed Toby, and as soon as he could get Central he begged to be connected with the office of the Chief of Police.

Now Toby hardly expected that the brave defenders of Carson would march up to the Jucklin

domicile, and arrest those elephants, dromedaries, zebra, ostrich and last but not least the terrible king of the dark African jungle, as Nero was described on the posters that decorated all the bill boards in town. But when citizens were in any sort of trouble it was only right they should put it up to the police. What were those men paid for, but to shoulder all the burdens that might arise, and find a solution to mysteries? Why, they would not earn their salt unless people found something for them to do once in a while; because Carson most of the time was as sleepy and peaceable as any town could be.

"Hello! hello!" said a voice over the wire.

"That you, C-c-chief?"

"It certainly is; what can I do for you this morning?" came the voice.

"This is T-t-toby J-j-jucklin s-s-speaking to you!"

"I see it is," replied the official, who knew Toby very well, and doubtless his stuttering also. "Well, what's happened this Sunday, Toby? Storm knock a chimney down at your place? It would only make six I've heard from, not to speak of the church spire being out of plumb again."

"D-d-did the circus g-g-get to town last night, C-c-chief?"

"Did it? Well, I should say yes. There's the dickens to pay, and I guess most of the churches'll have thin audiences this morning, when the news leaks out, Toby."

"Y-y-you mean the animals escaped, d-d-don't you, Chief?"

"They surely did," came the reply over the wire. "Wind blew the round-top down, upset some of the cages, and made such a big panic that all the live stock that could get a move on took French leave. Right now the whole outfit is scouring the roads for ten miles around, but I haven't heard that they've run across anything yet. The whole country will be just plumb crazy when it gets known."

"W-w-what was it g-g-got away, Chief; w-w-would you mind tellin' me?"

"Certainly not, Toby; you know I'd do a heap to oblige you," the head of Carson's police force went on to say, for Mr. Jucklin had considerable influence in politics, and the Chief knew which side of his bread was buttered, as well as any one could. "Let's see, I heard it over the wire, and Mr. Jenks was all broke up over the catastrophe, so he mixed things up some; but I remember he said all the camels and the elephants had lit out, ditto their trained ostrich that draws a cart around the ring like a hoss; and there was some monkeys that broke loose too, yes, and now I think of it he did mention a striped animal which he called the zebra; and I think he said a lot of lions and tigers, and also a few others I can't recall for the moment!"

"Well, part of the lot are camped right now in our back yard!" said Toby, filled with such a

sense of importance that he neglected to stumble over a single word of this sentence.

Evidently the man in blue uniform at the other end of the wire was staggered by this unexpected communication.

"What's that, Toby?" he exclaimed; "you wouldn't try to deceive me, I hope? Sure you haven't been dreaming, and seeing things? I know you're fond of wild animals, and have got a little collection yourself; but explain some more. I wouldn't want to get hold of Mr. Jenks, the circus man, and then have him disappointed."

"Oh! no danger of that," sang out Toby, jubilantly; "let's s-s-see, there's one l-lion, three elephants, three double-humped c-c-camels, an ostrich, and the zebra there right now, 'cause I s-s-saw the whole lot. D-d-don't know how m-m-many more might be around on the other s-s-side of the house. Seems like they j-j-just took to the Jucklin ranch. K-k-knew a good thing when they saw it. Will you notify this M-m-mister Jenks, or shall I?"

"Why, he's right across the square now, getting some breakfast, and I can run over to tell him, Toby, thank you."

"H-h-hold on, Chief!"

"What else is there, Toby?"

"D-d-do you know if he's been offerin' any s-s-sort of reward for the recovery of his l-l-lost animals?" asked the boy, eagerly.

"Why, I did hear him say he'd be only too glad

to make it worth anybody's time who brought him information that would lead to the recovery of his property. And I'll see what I can do for you, Toby. It ought to be worth fifty dollars to you, that's right. But don't detain me any longer, because he might get away. He's got a car at the door of the hotel waiting for him. See you later, Toby, and thank you for calling me up."

Toby puzzled a little over this last remark. He finally grinned, and concluded that possibly there might be something in it for the genial Chief also, which was why he declared himself as indebted to the boy who brought the information.

Toby's next move was to hurry down to the kitchen to warn the cook not to poke her head out of doors on penalty of receiving a shock. He was just a few seconds too late to prevent this, however, for just as he reached the kitchen, and discovered the back door open, a figure came tearing through like mad. It was the black cook, Sallie Marie, and the whites of her eyes were showing as she slammed that door shut and then fell back in a big chair, almost fainting.

"Don't yuh go out dar, chile!" she whimpered, as she thought she saw Toby making for the door; and so he was, but only to turn the key in the lock, as though fearful that some cunning and aggressive animal might manage to open it; "de Noah's ark am drapped down on top of dis wicked town durin' de night, an' der's de animiles awalkin' 'round our garden two by two, de

elephants an' de camels an' de lions. Oh! whatebber am we agwine to do, chile? Does yuh think I's on'y makin' b'lieve, or dat I done got de fever? Jest look fo' yo'self out o' de window, an' see all dem awful t'ings out dere. I done spect yuh got all de menagerie yuh wants dis time, an' dat's a fack!"

Toby hastened to explain what had happened, and that the animals she saw belonged to the menagerie connected with the circus that was passing Sunday in Carson, meaning to give a parade Monday morning, to be followed by two performances later in the day and evening.

Then he hastened upstairs again to tell the rest of the folks; and for some time every one in the Jucklin house had his or her face glued to a window pane, watching the remarkable sight to be seen in their plain back yard, which for the time being seemed to have been transported to the heart of Africa.

Then the first detachment of the circus people hove in sight, and there were witnessed some of the strangest things that ever came to pass on the quiet of a Sunday morning in old Carson, since the days of the war, half a century before.

Men led elephants away; others came with the two-humped dromedaries, and after them the striped zebra trotted, showing something like temper because his spell of liberty had been so short.

Then came the ostrich, with its master leading it by a rope, and warning the curious spectators

to keep away from its feet because it could kick forward like a football punter, and with disastrous results.

Last of all a cage was brought to hold the lion that was at large; and while the men, armed with sticks and pistols, the latter being discharged frequently so as to inspire old Nero with alarm, drove the beast toward the open door of the wagon, the spectators peeped from behind corners and other places of refuge, ready to run madly if there seemed any chance of his turning toward them.

In the end all the animals that had gathered so strangely in the Jucklin yard were taken away. Toby had thought to call up his chums on the 'phone early in the affair, so that not only Max, but Steve and Bandy-legs were on the spot, to gape, and see all that went on, enjoying it immensely too.

That was a Sunday never to be forgotten in the annals of Carson. The news went around, and many timid people remained shut up in their houses the livelong day, not daring to venture out for fear lest they be pounced upon by a striped tiger, a yellow-maned lion, a man-eating panther, or some inferior beast like a common wolf, hyena or jackal.

The boys of the town were wild with excitement, and all day long a crowd gathered about the round-top, which had been repaired and hoisted. These circus men are able to meet sudden emergencies.

They know what it is to grapple with difficulties that come unannounced; and it is all in a day's work with them.

Some mended torn canvas; others looked after the animals, while fresh lots continued to scour the adjacent country, searching for such animals as had not been accounted for in the collection found in the Jucklin back yard.

It was the biggest advertisement the show could possibly have had, and the enterprising owner saw his opportunity to get out fresh bills, telling about the havoc of the storm, and announcing that these beasts of prey that had been at liberty were now all safely secured again—which Toby and his chums knew was a barefaced lie, for the men were still hunting along all the roads and the woods within ten miles of town—and "could be seen in the wonderful menagerie that formed a part of the grand aggregation," and so the announcement ran on, after the customary flamboyant manner of circus posters in general.

Toby had a little streak of business about him, and some time during the day he managed to interview Mr. Jenks, informing him that he was the boy who had been the means of sending information in first about the missing animals, and that it was his amateur menagerie in the back yard that had baited them.

So what did Mr. Jenks do but place fifty dollars in his hand, and thank him in the bargain. Toby was quite satisfied, but he could not help wonder-

ing what the Chief got out of it; though he never knew.

Of course he was also told that he could attend both performances, and fetch a dozen friends along with him in the bargain, a privilege Toby was pretty certain he would avail himself of, for he was a real boy, and as we know, loved animals far beyond the average of his class.

There was a tremendous outpouring of people on the following day and evening; for never had a show been better advertised than that of Mr. Jenks. Some people even hinted that the escape of the wild beasts had really been a shrewd dodge whereby a novel feature could be introduced into advertising practices; but others scoffed the idea, and pointed to the fact that even through Monday squads of the trainers and canvasmen continued to patrol the highways and byways around Carson, as though all of the wild beasts could not have been recovered in that raid on the Jucklins' back yard.

CHAPTER V

ON THE WAY TO THE WOODS

"PULL up here at the spring, boys, and let's all get a drink."

"Whoa! there, Ebenezer, you're going to get a little rest before we tackle the last three miles to the camping ground we've picked out."

Max had been the first speaker, and Steve did the talking to the horse that was drawing the wagon on which the four chums were seated. They had come quite a distance from Carson since early morning, fully fifteen miles along the road; and the animal between the shafts was beginning to puff, as though well tired out. But often some of the boys had only too gladly jumped down, and climbed hills, so as to make things easier for the beast of burden, for which possibly Ebenezer may have been thankful, and again he may not.

The Easter holidays had set in. Only of recent date had the Carson school trustees settled upon the new policy of shutting the doors for a full week at this time of year, so as to give teachers and scholars a breathing spell before the hard work of spring examinations; and it may be sure that the boys and girls appreciated the favor very much indeed.

With a whole week before them then, the four boys had started away early on that morning, bent upon making a new camp, and enjoying themselves to their full bent. Others might find pleasure in starting to play ball, and kindred sports that the coming of a few warm days always sees take on new life; but as for Max and his comrades, give them the open woods, and a tent, for their sport.

The excitement over the circus animals had about died out in Carson. After the passing of the show people began to think of other things, though there were some of the more timid who continued to see terrible wild beasts in every animal noticed on the roads or in the fields, such was the reign of terror the occurrence had instituted in certain families.

Toby was as proud as anything over his part in the affair. He believed that it had put him in the spotlight for the time being, because every one was talking about how queer it was all those animals should pick out the Jucklin back yard to congregate in; and that of course always brought up the subject of his love for collecting.

Besides, hadn't he made his chums turn green with envy when he showed them that lovely bunch of five ten-dollar bills, which the grateful circus proprietor had placed in his hand as a reward for sending in the earliest news concerning the location of his missing property?

Yes, Toby was as happy as the clam is said to

be at high tide. He fairly bubbled over with an excess of spirits, and even when Bandy-legs commenced to tease him he refused to display any temper.

In that wagon they carried most of the stuff that had been so useful on other similar expeditions to the woods in search of enjoyment.

There was the old tent which Max had tanned after a formula of his own, so that it had not only lost its dirty white look, but was now guaranteed wholly waterproof. Then they had various guns, from the reliable rifle Max owned to the newer little twelve bore Marlin double-barreled shotgun which Steve proudly claimed could outshoot any similar weapon ever made.

Besides they carried a full cooking assortment of kettles, fryingpans and coffeepots. As to the provisions, well, given four hearty boys with good appetites, an abundance of money in the treasury of the club, and with a whole week ahead of them in the woods, and you can easily imagine what an enormous stock of food they would be likely to lay in.

Unless something happened to deplete their stock of groceries there did not appear to be much chance of such a thing as real hunger being known in that camp. If they wanted fresh eggs, milk and butter, Max knew of a farmer within two miles who would be only too glad to supply them with all they could use, terms strictly cash with the order always.

It was now about three in the afternoon. They had a scant three miles more to cover before arriving at their journey's end; and hence were not in any great hurry to push along. So a little rest at the cool spring would not come in amiss, and give poor old Ebenezer a chance to get in condition for the last round.

As the boys lounged there and took things easy, they chatted about numerous matters; and it was only natural that in due time the talk should turn once more to the recent great scare Carson folks had passed through.

"Seems to me," Max remarked, with a laugh, "that in some families for years to come whenever they want to refer to anything that happened in the past, it's going to be something like this: 'the year the circus broke loose,' or else perhaps along this order: 'just a month after those horrid wild animals terrorized the town!' "

"Yes, and they're seeing 'em yet every little while," Steve went on to declare.

" S-s-sure thing," assented Toby, chuckling as he patted his pocket where possibly one of those brand new ten-dollar bills snugly reposed, for Toby believed in going prepared for anything that might happen, and money is always a good thing to have around; "didn't the C-c-chief tell me only y-y-yesterday that old Miss Moffat she c-c-called him up and demanded that he c-c-come and arrest a hyena that was runnin' all around her p-p-pasture lot; and when he hurried out there, taking

one of his men along, so's to s-s-shoot the t-t-terror, s-s-say, what d'ye think it was but the next d-d-door neighbor's d-d-dog?"

Bandy-legs heaved a long sigh at this juncture, which of course called attention to him.

"Hey! what ails you there?" demanded Steve.

"He does look like he mightn't be as happy as you'd think, when we're bound on such a glorious trip up to the woods," Max remarked.

"Well, I ain't," grumbled the one who was under fire just then.

"Not feelin' sick, are you?" Toby wanted to know, for he could not understand how anybody could fail to be bubbling over with joy when off on such a vacation as they had ahead of them; and with fifty dollars in hand things do look pretty rosy to a boy, it must be confessed.

"Aw! no, I could eat a house!" Bandy-legs shot back at him; "it's all about Nicodemus again."

"Hello! what's the c-c-cute little rascal b-b-been doing now?"

"Why, you see, ever since that menagerie had to go and break loose, our Nora, she seems more set against my bear cub than ever. I saw she was goin' to make trouble first chance she got, and so I've been mighty careful to keep the cub from slippin' loose from his collar, like he used to. But that's what he went and done last night, and however the critter ever got into the house beats me."

"What's that you say; the bear cub didn't try

to run away to the woods, but climbed in through some open window, and got in your house; is that it, Toby?" cried Steve, holding up his hands in pretended horror, but grinning at the same time.

"Huh! if you'd heard the yells that our Nora gave about nine o'clock last night, when she went up to her room, you'd athought it worth while mentioning," Bandy-legs continued, sorrowfully, yet with a twinkle of amusement in his eye.

"Wow! that sounds kind of interesting; suppose you tell us more about it, Bandy-legs," Steve implored, eager to hear particulars.

"Why, seems like," began the other, only too willingly, "her candle blew out just when she got up to the door of her room, which was wide open; so what does Nora do but feel her way in. She had some clean clothes in one arm that she wanted to lay on her bed while she lighted her candle again. But when she touched a hairy object that moved and whined-like, she nearly jumped out of her skin, because she felt just dead sure it must be one of the tigers that she always believed the circus men had never got back."

The three other boys roared at the picture conjured up by this vivid description, and it was a full minute before the narrator could go on with his story.

"Nora she climbed down both flights of stairs like she had wings," he went on to tell in his humorous fashion; "seems like she must have slid from the top to the bottom of the upper flight.

My dad ain't afraid of anything, so me and him both armed ourselves, and we snuck up to find out what had scared the hired girl. And there was poor Nicodemus, asettin' all curled up on the bed, and blinkin' his little rat eyes at the light we shoved into the room ahead of our guns."

Again there was a general laugh, as if the subject appealed to their love for the ridiculous; and they did not consider the alarm of poor Nora one little bit.

"Of course I laughed, and my dad did the same; but he told me then and there he had to choose between that bear cub and a good cook; and well, you know how it's always bound to turn out when a cook's in the scales. Poor Nicodemus got it in the neck. He has to go."

Toby made a queer sound and again his hand might have been seen to press against his pocket, as though he fancied he had the wherewithal right there to purchase the long coveted pet of Bandy-legs.

"But what did you do with him?" asked Max.

"Oh! nothing yet," came the reply. "Dad he said he'd look after him while I was gone on this trip, but he insisted that I part with my pet as soon as I came home again. So Toby, some time we'll talk it over, and you make me a good offer. He ought to be worth something decent, even to circus people. Bet you that Mr. Jenks'd have paid me ten dollars for him, spot cash."

Toby did not make any reply, but he gulped as

though he could already see the coveted bear cub in a nice new cage, constituting one of the attractions in his new collection, to be kept out on the farm his folks owned some miles away from Carson, and where the offensive odors that always go with a menagerie might not disturb any sensitive nose.

"Ever since then," continued Bandy-legs, thoughtfully, believing the seed had doubtless fallen upon fallow ground, and would bear fruit in season, "our cook has been actin' queer-like. She keeps alookin' under tables all the while like she expected to see tigers and lions acrouchin' there, ready to take a bite out of her. And she's even got to callin' my little Nicodemus bad names. She says he's sure a chip of the Ould Nick. That's what she told me this morning, when I was getting a big pie she made for me yesterday, and which is safe in a box in the wagon here."

"It seems to apply all right," commented Max, "and come to think of it, Bandy-legs, I guess he is all of that. I never heard of a pet as full of pranks as that cub is; and chances are Toby here will have his hands full looking after him, once he changes owners."

"T-t-try me, that's all!" Toby remarked, with the air of one who had made it a practical business in life to know all about wild animals, and how best to take care of them; having heard the owner mention the sum of ten dollars he felt as though the bargain had already been consum-

mated, and all that remained was for the goods to be delivered.

They loitered there by the spring for some time, and the horse seemed to revive enough to pull through the last stage of the journey. After that Ebenezer would have a long rest of nearly a week; and much of the return trip would prove easier, being down-hill work.

"All aboard again!" called Max, when he thought they might as well be starting ahead, and do some of the resting at the place they had picked out for a camp site. So they continued along the road.

Presently they turned off the main pike, to follow a side road that seemed to lead up into a wild stretch of country. Here an occasional farm might be run across but as a rule there were woods, and then some more woods, until one could tramp for miles and miles through stretches of country where it seemed almost like the primeval wilderness.

Of course most of these trees, though of fair size, were second-growth timber. The avaricious lumberman had long ago been through all this section, and only in patches was it possible to find any of the original great trees that were possibly growing a century or two back, when the whites were wresting this land from the possession of the Indians.

"This begins to look like business," Steve remarked, when they had been following this twist-

ing road for more than a mile; "and I can see why Max chose to bring us up here to do our camping. We'll hardly run across a living soul, unless we go over to that farm to get eggs and milk. And say, let me tell you there's considerable of small game frisking around this neck of the woods."

"I've seen heaps of gray squirrels running up the trunks of trees, and hiding on the far side, as they always do," Max observed.

"And three times a cottontail bounced away, once right under my feet," Bandy-legs added, as his quota of evidence in support of Steve's declaration with regard to their finding all the game they would need, if so be they felt that it would be right to do any shooting so late in the season.

"That was a red fox we saw slinking off a little while back," Steve continued; "and where you find that smart animal depend on it the hunting's good; for he'd clear out if it wasn't."

"Oh! d-d-did you see that?" gasped Toby, suddenly as he thrust out a hand, and pointed straight ahead.

Every one of them must have set eyes on the same object that had caught his attention, for they turned and looked inquiringly at each other. Steve even leaned back and hastily secured his gun, into which with trembling hands he commenced to push a couple of shells that were loaded with buckshot, a dozen to each.

"What could it have been?" Bandy-legs asked. "I just managed to ketch a glimpse of it as it disappeared in the brush, and if you gave me a dollar I couldn't say whether it was a brindle dog or a hyena or what!"

"That's just the way we all feel," Max told him.

It could be plainly seen, however, that the boys were more or less excited over the prospect of some of the wild beasts from the menagerie still being at large. Indeed, who could blame them, when there was a prospect of running across a hungry tiger, a ravenous wolf, or perhaps a man-eating lion at any time in their saunterings through the aisles of the forest?

CHAPTER VI

THE TERRIBLE ROAR

It was all of half-past four when the boys arrived at the place selected for a camp. Immediately all of them became very busy, for considerable work had to be done before night set in, so that they could feel fairly comfortable.

One staked out the horse so that he could crop the grass, and be contented, after being watered at the spring that ran close by. This fed a pond that Max told them could be reached in ten minutes or less, and which he believed might afford them some early fishing, if they felt inclined, as what boys would not?

The tent was quickly raised in a selected spot, where the ground sloped just enough to shed water in case of a downpour of rain; which is one of the first things to consider when making a camp.

From the way in which each fellow bustled around it was plain to be seen that they had had considerable experience in these things, and knew just how to set to work in order to get the camp in shipshape condition.

Toby built a splendid stone fireplace where the cooking might be done with a "minimum of dis-

comfort and a maximum of pleasure," as he remarked, though stumbling badly over the words he used to express his meaning.

They had a grating taken from one of the ovens at home; it was open like a broiler, and about two feet square. When placed on the stone foundation that was to serve as a fireplace, it could not be equaled as a steady foundation for coffeepot, kettles, or fryingpan. The boys had once used metal rods, but found these apt to slip unexpectedly, and several mishaps had led Max to suggest this better way of arranging their stove.

This camping-out business is like everything else that boys run after. After a spell they are apt to tire of it, and eagerly welcome home cooking with all the frills; but there remains the longing for the open, and the smell of the burning wood, so that after a certain time has elapsed they are just as eager as ever to go out again, and put up with all manner of inconveniences in order to be free from restraint for awhile.

From Max down to Toby all of them were bubbling over with happiness as they started to get their first meal ready. Even Bandy-legs seemed to have forgotten his woes in connection with Nicodemus, for he laughed and joked with the rest. Perhaps some of that forlorn look had been artfully assumed so as to cause Toby to believe he was breaking his heart over the necessity of having to part company with his pet cub. It might be possible that Bandy-legs was not so averse to

getting rid of the prank-loving bear as he pretended to be.

The night settled in around them finally, while they were still in the throes of cooking that first supper in the woods. As this was just before Easter Sunday, and that event always comes immediately after a full moon, they could expect to be favored with more or less heavenly illumination during their stay in camp.

When later on they finally sat around to enjoy the supper that had been cooked it seemed as though their cup of happiness must be complete. Everything tasted wonderfully fine to the boys, because they had their appetites along with them. But the surroundings no doubt had a good deal to do with it, for there was something of a tang in the air, it being only April; and from the woods arose a dank odor of rotting logs and leaf mold that was very pleasant to these lads.

Then the wood they were burning was for the most part hickory, ash or oak, hard stuff every inch of it; and the fumes that were wafted into their faces with each change of wind, while making their eyes blink and smart, were mighty gratifying to their sense of smell.

Those who really love the woods never pass through city streets, and get a whiff of hard-wood smoke, but what they draw in a big breath, and immediately picture the camp fire burning, with good chums seated around enjoying a tempting meal; and the boardinghouse spread looks less

appetizing than ever after that glimpse into Paradise.

"I hope all of you have brought some lines and hooks along," said Max, after the first edge had been taken from their hunger, and they felt disposed to talk more or less; "because, while the bass season won't open until the end of next month we might pick up some big pickerel in that pond I spoke of. I've heard tall yarns about their size there, and the savage way they take hold."

"Fresh fish wouldn't go bad," Steve went on to say, reflectively, as he took a second helping of fried potatoes from one of the fryingpans, and then fished out another nicely browned sausage from the other.

"But seems to me it's pretty early to expect 'em to take hold," Bandy-legs ventured to say, as he filled his tin cup from the coffee pot, and then added some condensed milk of the kind known as evaporated cream, because it has not been sweetened in order to keep it.

"W-w-what, for p-p-pickerel?" exclaimed Toby. "Why, they're ready to b-b-bite any old t-t-time, ain't they, Max?"

"I never knew the time when they wouldn't grab at bait," the other replied. "You know they're built on the order of a pirate, and that's what a pickerel or a pike is, a regular buccaneer. Why, I've been out on the ice on a big lake in

winter where dozens of little cabins and tents had been built, each sheltering a pickerel fisherman, who had as many as a dozen lines rigged through holes cut in the thick ice."

"I've heard something about that kind of fishing, but never had a chance to see how it was done," Steve went on to say.

"Tell us some more about it, won't you, Max?" Bandy-legs pleaded as well as a fellow could who was swallowing his supper in gulps.

"If ever you eat p-p-pickerel like you're chokin' things d-d-down right now," Toby hastened to say, "you'll have a n-n-nice lot of pitchfork b-b-bones stuck in your throat, b-b-believe me, Bandy-legs."

"Oh! guess I've eaten pickerel lots of times," retorted the other, indignantly; "I always go slow when I'm on a fish diet, and don't you forget it. But, Max, tell us about what you saw that time. We don't get such fishing around here."

"Glad of it," muttered Steve. "There must be mighty little sport fishing through the ice when it's bitter cold; and I reckon all they do it for is the market."

"You're wrong there," Max advised him, promptly; "for while some men fish on the ice as a business, and make fair wages, many others do the same because they like it. They even keep a little stove or a fire of some sort going in those cabins and tents; and let me tell you it's some

exciting watching the tip-ups signal here and there, when the fish are hungry, and biting fast and furious."

"Tip-ups, you call them; that has to do with the lines, don't it?" Steve asked.

"Yes, every line is rigged so that when a fish is caught the fisherman is notified in some way or other," Max went on to explain. "Some use little bells that tinkle with a bite; others have red strips of cloth that are pulled up to the top of a short stick; but the common way is to make a crotch cut from a branch of a tree answer. It tilts up when the line is tugged, and so you know that you ought to hurry there and get your prize. That's how they came to be called tip-ups."

"Well, as the ice has long ago gone out of the ponds around Carson I reckon we won't get any chance to try that queer sort of pickerel fishing," Steve observed; "but I brought my minnow seine along, so we ought to scoop up plenty of live bait, and they take with pickerel every time. You can trust Uncle Steve for bringing in an occasional mess of fresh fish."

"H-h-how about h-h-hunting?"

"Is the law on everything, Max?" questioned Bandy-legs.

"Pretty near everything," came the reply; "we'll look up the game laws in the morning, and see how we stand. I like to hunt as well as the next one, but all the same I don't believe in shooting game out of season, and I'd only do it if I

was starving, and had to save my life that way."

"But whether we go hunting or not," ventured Steve, "we're all glad we thought to fetch our guns along."

They exchanged quick glances at that.

"Which is to say," remarked Max, smiling, "that you haven't settled it in your mind yet, Steve, that what we saw disappearing was some barred dog belonging to a farmer, and not a striped hyena."

"Well, you never can tell," Steve stubbornly contended, with a wise shake of his head; "we know there must have been some beasts got away that they never did find again. Just what they were nobody seems able to agree. I've heard all sorts of guesses made; and a hyena might be one of the same, as well as anything."

"They come from India, don't they?" asked Bandy-legs, smoothly.

"Found in both Asia and Africa," Max explained. "I'm not sure of any being met with in Europe, though there are plenty of wolves. They feed on carrion mostly, and are cowardly by nature; but all the same, they're nasty looking brutes, and always snarling the worst you ever heard. It makes your flesh creep just to hear them growl, worse than the ugly tempered wildcat Toby owns."

"Well, me to carry my Marlin wherever I go up here," announced Steve; "and if it happens that I run foul of a striped beast that I don't like the

looks of, you'll see me knocking the spots out of him first, and then finding afterwards what his breed is. If he turns out to be a plain dog, then he's paid the penalty for looking like one of these hyenas, that's all."

"D-d-don't you hear 'em?" asked Toby just then.

Steve and Bandy-legs made as though ready to reach out for their guns, placed conveniently near; but hesitated when they saw that Toby was grinning, and showed no signs of being worried.

"F-f-frogs, and heaps of the same over there in that p-p-pond you was telling us about, Max. Yum! Yum! reckon now I'm in f-f-for some g-g-good feasts."

All of them could now catch a distant croaking that announced the fact as stated by the observant Toby; and they knew that with that pond so close by they would be apt to take all the bullfrogs they wanted during their stay.

"But we didn't fetch that little target gun along," remarked Bandy-legs, regretfully.

"Don't need it," Steve told him; "do we, Max?"

"Not that I can see," answered the one appealed to; "I've got a piece of red flannel with me, and some hooks. All you have to do is to cut a long pole, tie a stout line about two feet long to the end, with one of the hooks attached; and then fix a small clipping of the red stuff to the hook. When you see a big green-back on the edge of the

water sneak up behind him, lower the flannel gently until it dangles in front of him, and you'll see some of the funniest happenings you ever set eyes on; that is they'll be funny to you, but death to the frog."

"I've caught 'em that way many a time," Steve told them. "Sometimes the old frog will crouch down like a cat sneaking up on a sparrow, and then make a fling up at the bright thing, which I reckon he thinks must be a juicy sort of a bug. As soon as he feels the barb of the hook he tries to climb up the line and jump all around like a trapeze performer. But only a cruel fellow would stand and watch him suffer. I always try to knock him on the head instanter, and get his boots in my creel."

"That's the only way," Max added, approvingly. "Even a sportsman can be merciful to his game by putting it out of pain as quick as possible."

"I always do when I've shot anything I want for food," Bandy-legs vowed.

"And me, I always c-c-carry a little c-c-club along when I g-g-go fishing," Toby declared, proudly.

"Hear him, fellows?" exclaimed Bandy-legs, pretending not to understand; "he must think he's a policeman, and meaning to knock every sleeping tramp on the soles of his feet to wake him up."

"It's to k-k-knock the fish on the h-h-head after you've c-c-caught the same!" Toby hastened to

inform him, grandly, as became a humane sportsman.

"Any more coffee in that pot, Max?" Steve asked, passing his cup along, for he certainly had a weakness for the "ambrosia" as he often called it, though never allowed more than one helping at home, and then only at breakfast.

The meal went on to its close, and while in the start it had seemed as though the eyes of the cooks had been much greater than their capacity for stowing food away, judging from the minute amount that was wasted it would seem that they knew better; or else that the average boy's stomach does stretch away down into his lower extremities, as some people claim.

"That was a hunky-dory supper, all right," Steve admitted, as he lay lazily back on his blanket, and commenced to pick his teeth after the manner of one who has dined well, and is perfectly at peace with the whole world.

"Best I've had since the last time we ate grub together," Bandy-legs added, as his quota of praise, although he had been one of the cooks.

"And that was up in the Great North Woods, when we spent that joyful time with Trapper Jim, wasn't it?" Max suggested.

"I'd sure like mighty well to repeat that trip some of these fine days," Steve told them, "but I reckon we never will, because there are so many other temptations all around us. And seems like we might squeeze all the fun we can manage out

of this little vacation. Here we are, away off from everywhere, and if we want we can just think we're camping in the heart of Africa, with wild beasts all around us and savage Hottentots or Zulu warriors waiting to take us by surprise."

Steve liked to indulge in these little flights of fancy once in a while. His imagination sometimes ran away with him; but he seemed to get considerable of enjoyment out of the idea.

Hardly had he ceased speaking on the present occasion than each one of the four boys sat upright, and seemed to be straining his hearing to the utmost, as though some sound had come to them then and there that caused surprise, even consternation.

"S-s-say, w-w-whatever was that n-n-noise like thunder?" asked Toby, blankly.

Steve looked puzzled.

"That's what's got my goat, Toby," he remarked in a perplexed tone of voice; it might be one thing or another, but it sure wasn't thunder. As for me, now, I'm racking my poor brains to guess whether it could only have been a farmer's bull bellowing away off there; or we sat here and actually listened to a savage African lion at large!"

His words appalled every one, and it was well that supper had been eaten, else their appetites might have suffered a decided slump.

CHAPTER VII

THE QUEER ACTIONS OF STEVE

"Listen, and see if it comes again!" said Bandy-legs, with bated breath.

The four campers sat there for several tense minutes, each one almost holding his breath in the effort to train his ears so as not to miss the slightest sound that might come.

"Whoo—whoo—whoo!"

After all their great expectations, to hear this solemn cry from the depths of the woods made several of the chums chuckle.

"Good evening, Mister Owl!" Bandy-legs called out, with mock respect. "Hope all the little Owls are feeling quite well to-night. Glad to have us for company, are you? Well, we're just tickled to death to be with you, believe me."

"But s-s-say, that wasn't what we heard the other t-t-time!" objected Toby, in some dismay, as though he feared he might have been dreadfully deceived by mistaking the booming hoot of a horned owl for the roar of a lion.

"Oh! no, of course not, Toby," Max hastened to assure him; "but it seems as though there isn't going to be any *encore* to that other noise."

"Then h-h-how are we agoin' to decide w-w-what it was?"

"We might take a vote, and see how we stand on it," laughed Max.

"Bull or lion, eh?" suggested Steve.

"There's a few clouds floating around loose," remarked Bandy-legs, as though in an uncertain state himself; "and p'raps after all that was a grumble of faraway thunder."

"S-s-s'pose somebody could be doin' blastin' up around here?"

This was a new idea that appealed to Toby. He sometimes startled his comrades by having an original thought.

"That isn't such an impossible thing after all, Toby," admitted Max, after considering it for a brief time; "although so far as I'm concerned I don't think it was either thunder, or a blast."

"That brings us back to the original question—bull or lion?" Steve pursued.

"We may never know which, if it isn't repeated," Bandy-legs observed, sagely; for not wanting to be outdone by Toby he had racked his brain in vain to find another possible explanation, and had to give it up.

"Well, whoever goes for eggs and milk to-morrow," began Max, "ought to make a little investigation on his own account. Perhaps he might manage to pick up a few points that will help us decide this mystery."

"You m-m-mean ask the f-f-farmer whether he

k-k-keeps a bull, or a roarin' old l-l-lion in his b-b-barn?"

"Ask about the bull, anyway," Max told him. "And if we learn that he's the owner of such an animal, find out if the beast gives a bellow once in a while."

"All right, that's settled then," Steve announced. "If I happen to be one of the pair chosen to take that little excursion I'll put it up straight to the old hayseed, and learn the truth. But say, hadn't we better be changing the subject some, fellows. It isn't always a good thing to get talking *too* seriously about things like this just before you drop off to bed."

"W-w-why?" asked Toby, suspiciously, for he had noticed that Steve grinned somewhat when saying this, and gave him a quick look.

"Oh! well," the other continued, "you never can tell what sort of an impression things make on one's mind, and are carried with you into dreamland. I've done some queer stunts myself away back when I had the bad habit of seeing things in my sleep. And I know a fellow who thought he was in the heart of Africa watching the savage beasts come down to a waterhole to drink, and then getting up in the morning to discover the whole shooting-match had taken up quarters in his back yard. You never know what's going to happen."

"That's right, you don't," added Bandy-legs, and shaking his forefinger at Toby dramatically

he continued: "Now see here, Toby, just you quit dreaming about lions and elephants and rhinoceroses and such things. Dreams come true sometimes. Think we want to wake up in the mornin' to find a lion sitting on that stump over there; a striped jungle tiger perched in this tree waiting for his breakfast; and an old rogue elephant spoutin' water from our creek all over the camp? Just start thinking of apple pies, custards and that sort of thing, and sleep sound."

Toby only grinned back at him, and made no reply.

"How about keeping watch to-night?" remarked Steve, some time later.

"Oh! I don't believe that's absolutely necessary," Max informed him.

"Some of us are light sleepers anyway," suggested Bandy-legs.

"That's me, as a rule!" Steve instantly declared; "and a cat couldn't walk across the floor of my room without me waking up and asking who was there. Then again it seems as if when I hit the hay I never know a thing till daylight comes. They may tell me we had a heavy storm in the middle of the night, but it didn't faze me one little bit. I don't know why that should be, unless it depends on what I've been eating for supper."

"Well," Max told him, "let's hope then that this is going to be one of the nights when you're on guard, and that if anything tried to carry Toby off you'll hear him let out a yell."

"And then, Steve, remember we've got some prime provisions with us, that might tempt a hungry 'coon or a fox. If so be you hear stealthy footfalls like padded feet, get your gun ready to shoot."

"I will, Bandy-legs, never you fear," Steve informed him. "Something tells me this is going to be one of my wakeful nights; so the rest of you can sleep right along as comfy as bugs in a rug. I'll do the watching for the crowd."

Max made no further comment, but had Steve noticed the raising of his eyebrows, and the smile that flitted across his face, he might have suspected that the other entertained serious doubts concerning the wisdom of depending wholly on his continuing to be on the alert during that coming period when the rest of them would give themselves up to sound slumber.

In other words Max had privately determined that it was up to him to keep his finger on the pulse of passing events. He too was a light sleeper, once he had impressed the fact upon his mind that there was need of keeping on the alert; and few movements could take place in camp without Max being wise to them.

All due preparations had been completed looking to a period of calm. The horse was staked in a fresh spot, where he could eat to his heart's content; and such of their provisions that they thought might tempt prowling animals they had

hung on the limbs of adjacent trees, in such positions as seemed to insure their safety.

"Of course," said Steve, the last thing before crawling into the tent, "if there should happen to be a lion hanging around he'd gobble poor old Ebenezer the first thing. So if you hear a trampling and a neighing in the night, look out; also wake me up so I c'n have a finger in the pie. That's all from me."

He settled himself comfortably in his blanket, and seemed bent on going to sleep immediately, so that the others copied his excellent example. These boys had been through the mill so often that long ago they learned the folly of playing pranks, or "cutting up" after it was finally decided to seek their beds.

Several times did Max open his eyes and lift his head as some slight sound came to his sensitive ears.

Once it was a mysterious tapping on the canvas which made him smile, for he guessed readily enough that it must be some curious 'coon trying to find out what this bulky object might be that had invaded his preserves without so much as asking permission.

The second time was more puzzling, for he could not just say what had aroused him. On listening intently, however, he discovered that Ebenezer must have gotten to his feet again after a little rest, and started to cropping the grass

once more; and that it was his rope catching in some little shoot on the ground and being suddenly released that made the rustling sounds.

There came a third time for Max to awaken.

It was not any outside sound that aroused him now, but a movement *inside* the tent.

The moon must be shining brightly, for it was far from dark or gloomy under the canvas, and he could plainly see what was transpiring.

Something ailed Steve, for he was beginning to get to his feet, without making a sound. Max lay there, and watched him curiously. Was Steve uneasy, and did he mean to step out so as to take a look around, impelled by thoughts of that lion being at large?

This was the first idea that flashed through the mind of the watcher; but he speedily found reason to change it. Steve did not pick up his little Marlin shotgun, as it might be expected he would do if he meant to take a turn around, and see whether anything was stirring.

Then perhaps he had found himself thirsty, and was going for a drink to the nearby spring. Still, if this were so Max wondered at him for not thinking to take some weapon along, for there was no telling but what he might need it.

Now Steve was crawling silently out of the tent; and curious to know what it could mean, Max hastened to copy his example. When he wished, he could do some excellent stalking, and although Steve might have a good pair of ears he

certainly showed no evidence of hearing any one come after him.

When Max found himself outside he saw the other moving softly away. He was in his bare feet, not having taken the time to slip on his shoes, as Max had done. This in itself looked queer. Steve ought to know that walking was not the most pleasant thing imaginable when going barefooted, even for such a short distance as lay between the spring and the tent.

The night air was also pretty chilly for a fellow clad only in pajamas, and coming fresh from a warm blanket. Yet Steve did not seem to mind that little thing, for he was moving steadily along, like an Indian brave going to the grand powwow.

Max had been thoughtful enough to take his blanket along with him; not only that but he had also picked up his rifle which was lying conveniently near; for Max had a streak of caution in his composition, and did not like to be taken unawares.

Well, there was Steve moving in the direction where they went to get their water. The tent had not been pitched exactly on the border of the little brooklet that ran from the bubbling spring, because there was really no necessity of this; and besides, the ground just there was not so well adapted to such a purpose.

"If he's after a drink well and good," Max was saying to himself as he started after the other boy; "and since the thing had been mentioned I

believe I'm some thirsty myself, so that I could stand a gulp or two. That's mighty nice water, and we don't get anything as good in Carson. But Steve does act queer, for a fact. I wonder now if he can be up to his old tricks again."

Now, in times past Steve had been addicted to the bad habit of doing considerable walking in his sleep. He was himself fully convinced that he had outgrown the trouble; but Max believed it was liable to crop up again under certain conditions favorable to its growth, especially if his mind should happen to be worried.

In this case it could hardly be that, because he had not taken his gun along, as he might have done, if possessed by the idea that lions were prowling near, and that it was his duty, as the guardian self-appointed of the camp, to go out and scare them away.

Max noticed that the moon did not stay out all the time. It was pretty well up in the heavens by this time, and he figured from that it must be somewhere in the neighborhood of one o'clock; for long ago Max had learned the useful woodsman way of telling time very closely by observing the passage of the stars, and the moon, across the blue canopy overhead.

There were batches of clouds that from time to time drifted across the bright silvery face of the moon; and when this occurred a period of half darkness was apt to ensue.

But Max had no difficulty in keeping Steve in

full view. This was rendered easy by the fact that the chum's pajamas were of a light color, and could be readily seen against the darker background of the forest.

Just as Max had suspected, he was making a bee-line for the spring. Awake or asleep, Steve was undoubtedly thirsty, and meant to indulge in a drink. Max had never heard of any one doing this when walking in their sleep; but he could remember Steve carrying out some very odd stunts while in this dormant condition, and he guessed it was possible.

He drew a little closer, though not meaning to do anything to arouse the other, who after getting his drink would possibly meekly return to the tent. In the morning Max would accuse him of sleep-walking, and if Steve indignantly denied it, Max could ask him to look at his feet, and demand if he was in the habit of going to bed with the soil of the woods on his soles.

All this flashed through the mind of the boy who followed close on the heels of the leader. He even decided to stand where Steve must surely notice him on his return, and in this way it would be easily settled whether the other were awake or walking in his sleep.

It is so easy to make plans, and yet the best of these may be smashed by some little unexpected happening.

So it was in this case.

Steve had almost reached the spring when all

at once a shrill scolding screech rang out, cutting the stillness as with a sharp knife.

Max heard a heavy sound as of something striking the ground. He also caught the flutter of some hairy form that seemed to vanish amidst the branches of the big tree under which Steve chanced to be at the time.

It all happened so quickly, and without the least warning, that although Max was considered a very speedy boy, acting like a flash in a warmly contested game of baseball, he did not think to raise the gun he was gripping in one hand, holding his blanket about him with the other, until the *thing,* whatever it might be, was gone from his sight.

Steve had come to a rigid standstill the very second that screech made the echoes ring through the aisles of the forest; he seemed startled, amazed and apparently frozen stiff in his tracks.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MYSTERIOUS HAM THROWER

"Where am I? Oh! what was that fell alongside me? Who's throwing stones? Hello! Max, Toby, Bandy-legs, where are you all at?"

Steve had found his tongue apparently, and was shouting all this at the top of his voice. Max thought it high time he showed himself, so as to quiet the excitable chum.

"All right, Steve; I'm here at your elbow, you see," he remarked, stepping out into plainer view. "You've only been up to your old tricks again, and walking in your sleep. I think you must have had a bad case of thirst, for you started straight for the spring, and you see you nearly got there."

"You don't say?" ejaculated Steve, looking down in some dismay at his bare feet, and his now shivering figure, clad only in thin pajamas. "But what happened, Max? Sure that was a terrible screech that woke me up; and I tell you I heard some heavy thing bump on the ground close by me!"

"So did I, Steve," added the other; "let's look and see."

Five seconds later and Max gave utterance to a bubbling cry.

"Great Cæsar!" exclaimed Steve, staring at the object the other bent over and picked up; "this is the funniest thing that ever happened to me, Max. Why, if it ain't raining *hams* up here in the woods! Some farmer's smoke-house must have blown up, and we get the benefit."

"Wait a little, Steve," said Max, solemnly; "take another look, will you? Perhaps you'll notice that this is only half a ham."

"Why, so it is, Max."

"Look closer, and tell me if you've ever seen it before," Max continued, holding the smoked meat up so that Steve could see better.

"Ginger!"

"Oh! then you recognize it, do you, Steve?"

"Why, yes, I seem to, Max," admitted the other, staring first at the section of ham and then upwards toward the tree from which it had apparently descended, aimed so as to strike him; "but what's *our* ham doing away off here, tell me that, will you? We didn't fasten it to this tree, but the one close to our tent; so we'd know if anything came nosing around."

"All right, Steve; it looks as if something did come nosing around, without any one of us being the wiser. And that creature, whatever it may have been, was carrying the ham away when it thought you must be following below; so what does it do but let out a screech of fury, and whang the ham straight down at you."

"Gee! ain't I glad though he didn't happen to

be the pitcher of his nine, because he might have made a better shot; and if that seven pound piece of smoked pork had taken me on the coco I'd have seen more stars than there are up above us now."

"Yes, Steve, it's sometimes better to be born lucky than rich," Max told him; "but there the other boys are calling to us, and wanting to know what it's all about. As you're beginning to shiver you'd better turn around and trot back to where you left your blanket, don't you think?"

Steve had a terribly stubborn streak in his composition. He proved it right then and there.

"I'm shivering, all right," he remarked, with chattering teeth, "but I reckon it's more because of the excitement than that I'm cold. Anyway, if I had the good sense to make my way out here in my sleep just because I was thirsty, why, seems like it'd be too bad to get disappointed; so I'm going to have a drink, no matter what happens."

With which he deliberately passed on a dozen paces, reached the spring, and taking the tin cup they kept there proceeded to slake his thirst. Max could not help admiring his grit, even though believing that Steve would be wiser if he forgot his thirst and hurried to the shelter of his blanket.

"Course you mean to carry the ham back with you, Max?" he inquired, as he once more joined the other.

"I should say so," Max told him; "and after this we'll have to be more careful about our smoked meat, unless we want to feed every animal

up here. They're smart enough to get on to that racket of hanging it from a limb. We'll keep it inside the tent, and they can only get it by creeping over us as we sleep, which would be a risky thing to do, I'm thinking."

"Any idea what sort of a thing that animal in the tree was?" asked Steve, as he cast an uneasy look aloft, doubtless wondering whether the fierce beast held a grudge against him for having caused it to relinquish its dinner; so that after that he would be a marked boy.

"I couldn't say," Max replied, slowly. "I only had a glimpse of something moving up there, and then it was gone. The moon happened to be behind a cloud at the time, and that helped to fool me. All I can say is that it was a big animal, and not a 'coon or 'possum."

"Whew! some people keep on saying they never did get that tiger back after the storm set the animals free from the cages," Steve said, uneasily.

"Hello! there, what's all this row about?" Bandy-legs called out just then, for the returning pair had drawn near the khaki colored tent, where they discovered their chums standing with guns in their hands, and blankets swathed around their lightly clad figures, looking for all the world like a couple of mummies, or as Max afterwards told them, like Mexican peons with their ponchos.

"Yes, that's what we want to k-k-know!" added Toby.

"Oh! Steve here got thirsty while he was sleeping, and stepped out to go to the spring for a drink," Max informed them. "I happened to see him, and took a notion I'd follow and see that he didn't come to any harm. Then some animal up in a tree, thinking Steve was going to get after him, threw this down to him, and let out a screech that beat anything I've heard this long while."

"Why, that's a half a ham!" ejaculated the astonished Bandy-legs.

"*Our* h-h-ham, in the b-b-bargain!" shrilled Toby.

"Just what it is," Max continued; "you see, the rascal had actually stolen it, and was making off when he saw Steve below, and got angry. It came mighty near hitting our chum on the head, which would have floored him good and hard. So he was lucky to escape as he did."

"And we're lucky to get our ham back!" Bandy-legs argued, as though after all that were the main point—which from a boy's standpoint it certainly was.

Meanwhile Steve had dodged under the canvas, and presently reappeared, also swathed in his blanket. He was still too much excited to think of sleeping, and consequently meant to stand it out with the rest. Perhaps curiosity had also something to do with the matter, for he would wish to know what Bandy-legs and Toby thought about the species of animal that had carried their smoked meat off.

Their tongues did certainly wag at a great rate for a spell. All sorts of suggestions were made, some of them fairly good, and others bordering on the ridiculous. Toby was for believing that it must have been a tiger, or at the very least one of those terrible spotted leopards they remembered seeing walking up and down in its cage, as though always hoping to get out to its missing mate.

"And they s-s-say leopards have got the w-w-worst k-k-kind of tempers," he insisted, when some of the others threw doubt on this idea.

"Well, whatever it is," Max concluded, "it acted like it was mad at Steve here for walking in his sleep."

"Don't blame the critter much, either," muttered Bandy-legs; "because any feller that would be guilty of doing such monkey-shines ought to have a whole ham flung at his head every time."

"Hold on there," said Steve, sharply; "that's always the way with you fellows. Why, you ought to be voting me a bunch of thanks right now, instead of hauling me over the coals like you're doing."

"Oh! is that so, Steve?" cried Bandy-legs, with considerable of satire in his voice.

"Sure it is," the other went on to say, unblushingly. "Supposin' now I'd just continued to hit the hay, and snored on like you two seemed to have done, what's the answer?"

Bandy-legs and Toby exchanged puzzled looks.

"W-w-whatever do you m-m-mean, Steve?" asked the latter.

"How about that fine ham? When you looked around everywhere for it to-morrow morning and couldn't find the same high or low, you'd wish Steve Dowdy might have had a little walking fit on, and saved your bacon for you, eh?"

Max laughed at hearing that.

"I guess Steve's got it on you, boys, this time," he remarked. "It seems that in some cases walking in your sleep may turn out to be the right thing. We do owe him something, because it saved our ham this time. But all the same he's got to stop the habit before it gets him into a peck of trouble."

"I s-s-say we p-p-put a rope on him nights," Toby ventured, with emphasis. "Then if he tries to s-s-slope he'll find himself p-p-pulled up with a round turn."

"Hey, you just try it, that's all!" Steve told him. "What d'ye take me for, a horse, to be staked out nights, or hobbled and all that? I give you fair warning right now that whenever we're in danger of losing some of our belongings, if I take a notion to step out and walk in my sleep in order to save the same, I'm going to do it. Get that, don't you, Bandy-legs?"

In spite of all their exchange of views it seemed that after all they were no nearer a reasonable solution of the puzzle than in the start.

"We'll look around in the morning and see if

it left any tracks," Max suggested, after it seemed as though they had reached the finish of the matter so far as deciding on the species of animal went.

"That's the best thing said yet," ventured Steve; "and as usual it was left for Max to hit in with it. So, let's see if we can go to sleep again."

They crawled inside the tent and adjusted their blankets again. Max noticed that Bandy-legs changed his position somewhat. As he now lay no one could crawl out of the tent by way of the regular exit without brushing across his recumbent figure more or less. The other did not say anything as to why he did this, but Max could give a pretty good guess.

Steve was too sleepy to pay any attention to what was going on, or he might have taken Bandy-legs to task for trying to play sentry over him, knowing that he must be in the other's mind when he laid this trap.

"We want you to notice, Steve," Bandy-legs told him the last thing, "that Max fetched a bucket of fresh water in from the spring just now; and so if you happen to get thirsty again before morning, just help yourself. It'll save you a lot of trouble."

"Well, seeing that we've got all our grub inside here now, and there's nothing more to be hooked, I guess I'll keep quiet. But you want to be care-

ful how you steal my thunder when the credit's passing around."

Saying which, Steve hid his head under the folds of his blanket, and they knew he had spoken his last word.

The others relapsed into silence, and before long all of them had gone soundly asleep. Nor was there any further alarm during the balance of that first night in camp.

When Max crawled out again dawn had come, and in fact the sun was peeping up in the east. First Max looked to see that Ebenezer was all right; for he had felt a little uneasy concerning the horse. He found that the animal was already beginning to gather in what grass lay around him, and apparently had not a care in the wide world.

Then the next thing he did was to pass over to the tree in which they had secured the ham and bacon, although later on removing everything to a more secure place of storage inside the tent.

Max carefully examined the ground underneath this tree. He was a pretty fair woodsman, and believed he could easily discover any imprint of padded feet such as would indicate the presenec of a tiger. But in spite of going over every yard of the soil as much as three times, Max was finally obliged to admit that there did not seem to be any clue. He could not find any track such as would tell of an animal having been there on the previous night.

This set him to thinking along another line. Apparently then the beast must have entered the tree from another one close by. It was reasonable, and he saw it could have been easily done by even a gray squirrel, for the branches interlocked in several places.

This seemed the more convincing when Max remembered that the ham had been flung bodily out of another tree, showing that the thief was making off without touching the ground at the time.

"Well, seems like it's going to keep right on being a mystery," Max told himself as he gave the quest up; "just as that roaring sound last night may never be solved. Perhaps there are a number of strange wild beasts at large up here; and that our little outing is going to be an exciting one after all."

"Yes," added Steve, who had come out of the tent in time to hear Max say the last of this, "and don't it beat all how things do come around our way, to give us a grand time? When you look back for the time we've been chumming together you can see heaps of happenings that other fellows would give most anything to have cross their trail. But we've got nearly a whole week up here to ourselves, Max; and I say it will be mighty funny if we can't guess the answer to a silly little question like this: Who killed Cock Robin? Or take it the other way, Who tried to knock my brains out with half a ham? And listen here, an-

other night I'm meaning to sit up and see if I can't get a crack at the miserable old thief with my Marlin gun. He'll be sorry the rest of his natural life if he comes nosing around here again."

Steve meant every word he spoke, and Max could see that he had been considerably worked up by what had happened.

Of course they would have numerous other things to engage their attention during this, their first day in camp; but nevertheless from time to time their thoughts must go out toward the little mystery by which they were confronted; and this was apt to start fresh talk about solving the same.

CHAPTER IX

"MILLIONS FOR DEFENSE!"

That was indeed a busy day for all of the boys in camp.

They had numerous things that they wished to do, and turned from one to another in rotation. It might have been noticed too, that they were a little nervous for all they made light of the possibility of meeting some strange beast whenever they went away from the camp ground.

This was shown particularly when Steve and Toby took a notion during the middle of the morning that they would try the fishing over at the pond. If the pickerel declined to bite they might at least pick up some good-sized frogs; so they went prepared for both things; but they also took their guns along, which was a little strange, because they would hardly need them in trying to land either fish or frogs.

Steve had his minnow seine, with which they could doubtless secure plenty of live bait. Then from selected positions along the bank they meant to cast their lines out, hoping to land a few finny prizes that would vary the bill of fare for supper.

All of this was carried out to the letter; the minnows were easily secured, and kept alive in a

little shallow pond made by banking up mud on the border of the larger sheet of water. Then they baited their hooks, and cast out, with the fisherman's habitual hope actuating their actions.

The pickerel proved to be both hungry and accommodating, for they soon began to take hold savagely. Several fine fish were landed after a fierce struggle that afforded the anglers more or less pleasure; and they felt encouraged to keep up the sport, assured of plenty for a meal.

When the fish were taken from the hooks they were strung on a stout cord, and kept in the water, so that they would remain fresh longer. Toby would not keep far away from this place long at a time.

"What ails you anyway?" Steve several times called out; "why don't you try a new place like I do?"

Finally the stuttering boy condescended to inform him.

"S-s-seems like this place is as g-g-good as any," he said; "and then p'raps you think I've g-g-gone and forgot all about how that b-b-bear got away with our fish the time we were up at Trapper Jim's p-p-place?"

"Oh! then you're half expecting to have a big bear step out of that brush yonder, and start to carrying away our catch, eh?" Steve demanded. "Well, perhaps it might happen, who knows? After a fellow's gone and had half a ham thrown at his head by some animal up in a tree he's ready

to believe near anything. If one does come, Toby, be sure you give a yelp so I could get started on the run. Bear steak wouldn't go halfway bad; and it'd be all the same if he was tame or wild, I'm thinking."

Although after that both boys continued to keep one suspicious eye on the neighboring woods, and made sure that their guns were always ready, nothing happened. It might be they were somewhat disappointed, because both had a streak of love for adventure in their composition, and would possibly have welcomed the excitement that must follow the appearance of a real live bear.

The string of pickerel and perch they carried back to camp aroused the others to enthusiastically admit that Steve and Toby certainly took the premium for catching the wary denizens of the pond. They found themselves delegated to repeat the performance on succeeding days, as long as their appetite for fresh fish remained good.

That afternoon Toby set to work making what he confidentially told Steve was to be a trap. If the unknown animal came prowling around again on the ensuing night, perhaps it would be sorry for trespassing without an invitation.

Just what sort of an arrangement this was going to be he would not declare, but promised to explain it all to them later on.

"Who'll go with me over to the farmer's, to

get some fresh eggs and milk?" asked Max, a short time after they had eaten lunch.

"Now don't all look at me that way," Bandy-legs remarked, "because I'm ready to be the victim as soon as I get my second wind, which'll be in about half an hour longer."

"That's always the way with him," Steve complained; "he eats so much that for a whole hour or so he's just logy, and not fit for anything. Now Toby and me think we did our share when we caught that nice lot of fish this morning."

"Didn't you hear me say I was meaning to go with Max?" demanded the other, bridling up. "Well, there's no need for hurrying so. It's a long walk there and back. I'm just wondering whether we ought to take a gun along."

"What for, to shoot the bull if you meet him?" asked scornful Steve.

"Oh! you never can tell," replied the other; "and I noticed that you was mighty careful to lug yours along when you went after fish. Thought a big pickerel'd jump out of the water and chase you, p'raps. Careful how you let fish take a bite out of your leg, ain't you? Well, we might run across some savage animal that'd be a heap worse than a pickerel's sharp teeth."

"I'll carry a gun if you think best," Max remarked; "but as we'll have eggs and milk to tote back with us it might be in the way."

"Just as you say, Max," Bandy-legs continued,

nodding to himself in a wise way, as though he had determined on a certain course for himself, which he did not consider it necessary to explain to all the rest.

When the two left camp Steve was climbing a tree with the avowed intention of closely examining the limb from which the smoked meat had been hung.

"A cat, big or little, has got *claws,*" he remarked, as if to explain his actions; "and I guess it might leave some scratches on the bark that would help explain things. Anyhow no harm done trying to see how far my theory will go. Good luck, fellows, and don't you get lost now."

"No danger of that when Max is along," replied Bandy-legs, confidently, as he and his chum strode away.

They knew the location of the farm, because several times that morning there had been borne to their ears the distant barking of a watchdog; and Max had taken special pains to locate the direction from which the sound came. All they would have to do was to keep heading straight into the west until they struck the cleared ground, when the rest would be easy enough.

"The boys have promised to keep the fire going while we're gone," Max told his comrade, as they walked along in company, following what seemed to be a fair trail that led in the right direction, "and to feed it with green wood pretty much all the time."

"Green wood!" echoed Bandy-legs, looking puzzled.

"So as to make more of a black smoke, which will be of considerable help to us in finding our way back to camp," Max informed him.

"Oh, yes, I see," Bandy-legs went on, shooting a look full of admiration toward his companion; "it certainly does take you to think up the best things ever. Now, that wouldn't have occurred to me in a thousand years."

"This walking isn't so bad after all, is it?" asked Max, quick to change the subject when he saw signs of the other breaking out in praise of his woodcraft.

"That's right," his chum admitted; "only I hope we don't meet up with anything that's going to make us sorry we didn't fetch a gun along."

"Not much chance of that," Max argued.

"But then you know there *is* something loose in this neck of the woods that's got us guessing. What it can be beats my time. A tiger'd most likely pounced on poor old Ebenezer, and paid mighty little attention to our smoked meat; he'd want the fresh stuff right off the reel."

Bandy-legs making a misstep just about then, and almost rolling down a little declivity, found that he had better pay more attention to his gait and talk less; so for some time they walked along in silence.

"There, did you hear that?" Max asked him, presently.

"It certainly was a rooster crowing," the other admitted.

"And right ahead of us, too," Max continued; "which goes to show that we've been hitting the right trail."

"No thanks to me though, Max, because if I'd followed my bent we'd have changed our course more than six times. I thought I knew something about keeping a straight track, but I'm away off."

Some boys seem to take to these things just as naturally as a duck does to water. There are others who do not appear to have the elements in them for making woodsmen, no matter how much they try. Bandy-legs was apparently of this latter class. Now and then he might flash up, and do something creditable, but it was only to fall back into his old careless ways again, and depend on others to do the hard thinking for him.

Five minutes later, and he gave a little shout.

"There's the farmhouse ahead of us, Max, with all the outbuildings in the bargain. Hope we can get the eggs and milk all right, because we've come a long way for the same. And there isn't anything I like better when camping out than plenty of hen fruit, together with the lacteal fluid from the cows. Whew! here's trouble with a big T all right! Look at the size of that Towser makin' for us, would you? Let him take a bite, and there wouldn't be much calf left."

"Oh! I don't know, you're pretty good-sized, Bandy-legs," said Max with a chuckle; but all the

same he looked about him, and hastened to pick up a stout stick that chanced to be lying near by.

"Where's the mate to that, Max; see anything for me around? We've got to teach him we believe in the old motto, 'Millions for defense; not one cent for tribute.' What about those guns of ours; wouldn't they come in handy right now to keep him off! Get out, you scamp; what are you making straight for me about? I haven't lost any dog that I know of. Why don't you sick Max there; he's got something for you. Hi! keep away, I tell you!"

The large and savage dog seemed bent on taking a firm grip of Bandy-legs. Perhaps he may have rather fancied his build, and believed it would be easier to pounce on a boy with bowlegs than another who stood five foot-ten in height. Then again the fact that Max was swinging that stout stick vigorously may have had more or less to do with the beast selecting the shorter chum as his intended victim.

Bandy-legs skipped about in a lively fashion, trying to keep himself away from "entangling alliances" with those shiny white teeth. He also succeeded in giving the animal several hard kicks; but instead of discouraging the beast this rough reception seemed to make him the more determined to accomplish his purpose.

Max could hardly follow their movements, they swung around so rapidly. He meant to rush in at the very first opening, so as to rescue his chum,

for he saw that Bandy-legs was in a pretty bad way, with that savage brute leaping again and again at him.

He might get his legs twisted as he sometimes did, and take a fall, when the dog would pounce on him like a shot, and perhaps mangle him badly. For this reason Max was bent on joining issue with the dog, and letting him feel the hardness of the club he had picked up.

There was no chance for him to do this, good though his intentions may have been.

Suddenly in the midst of the savage growling and chasing about he heard Bandy-legs cry out exultantly:

"You will have it, then? Now, there's five more left if you're greedy!"

Hardly had he spoken than the big dog began to howl most mournfully. Max could hardly believe his eyes when he saw him writhing and twisting as if in agony, at the same time trying to rub his head with his forepaws.

"What did you do to him?" Max cried; but he might just as well have saved his breath, for he saw what Bandy-legs was holding up, and he knew that the other had been wise enough to fetch along with him a little squirtgun called an "ammonia pistol," which those on bicycles who are troubled by dogs chasing them, often carry in order to teach the brutes a much needed lesson.

It may seem cruel to send a charge of pungent ammonia or hartshorn into the eyes of a dog, but

used with discretion such punishment is far better than that the rider suffer a fall and possibly a broken neck, or be mauled by a savage brute which he has not harmed in the least.

"Good-bye, Towser, old fellow!" cried Bandy-legs, mockingly, as the dog started full-tilt for the farmhouse, yelping dolefully as he ran. Next time get wise to the fact that things ain't always as green as they look. Took me for an easy mark, didn't you, but if I am a little crooked about the pins, that doesn't mean I'm not on to a few games. Come again when you can't stay so long. Tra-la-la!"

Bandy-legs was evidently in a good humor, and felt like shaking hands with himself. To get out of a bad scrape, and without the least bit of assistance from anybody was a feather in his cap; and he believed that he had good reason to feel tickled over it.

"You got rid of the dog all right, old fellow," Max told him; "but look what's bearing down on us now, full sail!"

"My stars! it's the dog's mistress, all right; and say, don't she look like she means business from the word go, though? Hadn't we better run for it, Max? Sure I have enough stuff left for five more shots; but gee! whiz! you wouldn't want me to treat a lady to that sort of thing, would you? She's getting closer all the while, Max."

"Yes, I can see she is," returned the other, calmly.

"Say, you may be all right, because you didn't have anything to do with the shooting up of her pet; but what about me? I'm going to clear out, Max."

"No, don't do it, Bandy-legs," urged the other; "stay where you are, and leave it to me. I think I can fix it up, all right."

And really, such confidence did Bandy-legs seem to have in the powers of his companion that, although he shivered as he saw the approach of the farmer's wife, still he manfully stood his ground.

CHAPTER X

THE WILD ANIMAL TRAP

The woman who rapidly bore down on the two boys had fire in her eye. She evidently believed she had cause for feeling angry, since it was her dog that had gone howling toward the house.

Somehow she seemed to guess which one of the two lads had been the cause of the wretched animal's misery. Bandy-legs had perhaps been seen in close connection with the raging beast just before the change in the latter's tune came, and the vicious snappy bark became a frightened yelp.

"What do you mean, you young scamp, hurting my watchdog on his own ground? Don't you know I could have the law on you for that? And what's that you've got in your hand there? Looks like a pistol to me. Why, the impudence of you coming in here and actually *shooting* my poor Carlo!"

The farmer's wife said all this as she continued to advance toward Bandy-legs. She was large, and looked as though she might almost take a chap of his size across her knee, if she felt like it.

Bandy-legs wanted to turn and melt away, but he hated to show the white feather the worst kind. As this was an antagonist against whom he was

debarred from using force he therefore looked appealingly toward Max, who had promised to get him out of the scrape.

At the same time he held up the little contrivance he had in his hand.

"Yes'm, this is a pistol, but not the kind you mean," he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking, and to be as respectful as possible. "It holds just a little mite of ammonia, and is used by bicycle riders to keep savage dogs from tearing them to pieces. I had to try it on Carlo because he was just bound to take a bite out of my leg; and you know I can't spare any."

She looked down at Bandy-legs' rather crooked lower extremities, and the faintest flicker of a smile crossed her angry face.

Just then Max put in an entering wedge.

"How d'ye do, Mrs. Ketcham? I didn't expect we were coming to your house when we started out from our camp to try and get some fresh eggs and milk. Of course I did know you lived up in this region somewhere. But my chum wasn't to blame at all, Mrs. Ketcham, I give you my word for it. And Carlo will get over the pain in a short time. I hope you won't hold it against us."

Apparently the farmer's wife had not taken a good look at Max up to then. Her entire attention had been focussed on the guilty party, whom she meant to intimidate with her righteous anger.

It was astonishing what a sudden change came over her rather vinegary face as she recognized

Max. The fact of the matter was, that she had been supplying his folks with fresh butter and eggs for several years, and accounted them among her best customers, going in twice a week to deliver her goods.

When poor shivering Bandy-legs saw that change in the expression of her thin face he experienced the most delightful sensation. It was similar to what a fellow might pass through when he had been hauled up from over a precipice after hanging to a bush the roots of which were slowly but surely giving way.

"Why, is it you, Max?" the woman exclaimed, her face breaking out with a smile that made her look quite like a different person; "I'm real glad to see you up at the farm. And if this other boy is a friend of yours, why, of course I'll have to forgive him for hurting my poor old Carlo. Perhaps he had to do it, as he says; and my husband does say the dog is getting a little ugly in his old age. We'll forget it then. What's your friend's name, Max? Seems to me I ought to know him."

"He's Doctor Griffin's boy, Clarence," Max hastened to reply; "and as good a fellow as any one would want to know; but he always does object to letting dogs take a piece out of his legs, and that's why he carries that ammonia gun with him most of the time."

"Oh! I thought I had seen him before, but I wasn't sure," she observed, nodding her head; "but then I should have remembered so remark—

that is, such a good-looking boy. And I'm going to begin delivering eggs at his house on my very next trip to Carson, too. That's queer, isn't it? Clarence, shake hands with me, and excuse me for seeming to be angry. We have tramps come here so often, and they always shy stones at Carlo, so that when I heard him howling I thought some of that tribe had hurt him. I can let you have all the eggs you want, just laid, and the richest Jersey milk you ever saw. Come up to the house, both of you."

It was all smooth sailing now, and Bandy-legs was glad he had stood up for his rights. He would never have held his own respect had he allowed that beast to get a nip at him while able to fight against it, no matter whose dog he might be.

Once at the farmhouse and they were treated like honored guests. Mrs. Ketcham, as though desirous of making amends for her first outburst, insisted on their accepting a bumper glass of fresh buttermilk each; and this was accompanied by several real home-made doughnuts such as the boys had seldom tasted before.

She loaned them a covered pail so that they could carry the milk from her prize Jersey herd of cows back to camp; while several dozen snowy white eggs from Leghorn fowls were placed in a basket, and so guarded that they could not be broken by any ordinary little jolt.

It was just as well that these precautions were

taken, Max thought; for he knew some of the failings of his chum, and one of them was in the line of making frequent stumbles, when there was the least reason for tripping over roots or stones that might lie in the path.

When Max and Bandy-legs finally started back to camp their pockets fairly bulged with winter apples that had been kept over in the cool cellar belonging to the farm, where fruit and vegetables were held in stock through the cold months of the winter.

"Turned out a lucky day after all, didn't it?" remarked Max, laughingly, as they both walked along, each with one hand free to take care of the apple they were munching at the time.

"You're right it did," his chum replied, with fervor, and then he sighed as he continued; "but there was a time when I thought I'd tumbled out of the fryingpan into the fire. It seemed tough enough battling with Carlo; but the way she looked at me, like she could eat me up, was a whole lot worse. But then that was all put on, I guess; and anyhow I'm ready to vote Mrs. Ketcham a trump. She makes the bulliest doughnuts ever, and her buttermilk is—well, it beats the Dutch!"

When they finally reached camp it was without any further adventure. They had seen no sign of any wild animal on the way, a fact Bandy-legs was glad to be able to report when Steve and Toby wanted to know about their trip.

The camp was now in good trim. Lots of little

things could be done from time to time, that might add to their comfort. Nails had been driven into trees upon which they hung their cooking utensils; so that each article could be found whenever wanted. Steve had improved on the fireplace, too, having noticed that it had not been built so as to get the most favorable draught, for the prevailing winds would be apt to come from the southwest during their stay, and the front should face that way to secure the best results.

Then Toby had made a nice drain around the upper side of the tent. This was intended to shed the water in case a heavy rain set in, as it was apt to do, this being April weather. There is nothing more uncomfortable when camping than to find that the tent leaks, or that on account of the lay of the land water keeps coming in to make everything soggy, when a little precaution would have prevented such a happening.

Toby had finished his trap, and proudly exhibited the same to the chums who had just returned.

"You s-s-see," he remarked, as he led them forward to where a young sapling seemed to be trying to form a bow in the air, held down by some invisible influence, "it's a very old idea, and I don't c-c-claim to be the inventor. This sapling is h-h-hickory, and she's got a d-d-dickens of a s-s-spring too. It was all S-s-steve and me could do to bend her d-d-down so the n-n-notch I cut in the end could be caught on the p-p-peg I drove in the g-g-ground. You can see how she works, with

that l-l-loop of stout rope trailin' along here."

"I reckon you mean to have some attractive bait on the ground, so as to draw the prowler here," suggested Max. "Yes, I've read of traps like this before, though I never used one. They catch crocodiles with them in some places, besides all other kinds of things."

"The idea is this, I take it," Bandy-legs proceeded to say; "when the animal is nosing around after the bait he gets a leg caught in this loop, which pulls tighter and tighter the harder he jerks, till in the end it draws the notched end of the bent sapling free, and of course the same shoots up straight. That takes the animal up with it, if he happens to be small; and holds his hind quarters elevated if he's bigger. That the way, Toby?"

"T-t-thank you for explaining it for me, Bandy-legs," the other quickly remarked.

"I think you deserve a lot of credit for doing such a good job, Toby," Max told the trapper, for he had taken note of the fact that everything connected with the wild animal trap seemed exceeding well done.

"And that hickory sapling does look like it was the toughest bow ever," Bandy-legs affirmed. "Why, I wouldn't be surprised if it could jerk a feller of even my heft up in the air, and hold him upside-down, so he'd look like he was walkin' on his hands."

"W-w-want to t-t-try it?" demanded the constructor, eagerly.

"You'll have to excuse me this time," Bandy-legs answered, apologetically; "you see I've been having all the exercise that's good for me already to-day, what with the four mile walk, and that little circus with Carlo. But I'm willing to take your word for it, Toby, that it'll do the business O.K. And I only hope now some sneaker gets his hind Trilby caught in that loop. It'd give me a whole lot of satisfaction to see a wolf or a striped hyena handing up by his rear kicker, and whooping like all get-out for help."

The sun no longer shone in the friendly way that had marked the earlier hours of this, their first day in camp. Clouds had gathered and covered the sky, so that the air seemed even chilly.

"Feels like we might get some rain before a great while," Max gave as his opinion, and there was no dissenting voice, much though the rest would have liked to argue the other way, for they had hoped to have a spell of fine weather accompany their trip to the woods.

"I had that in mind," remarked Steve, "when I started to lay in a stock of good dry firewood. You see, here's a splendid place to keep it in, under the upturned roots of this fallen tree. If the rain does come it'll hardly beat in there, and things are apt to keep fairly dry. How about that, Max?"

"A good idea, Steve, and I say we had better get busy and gather all the stuff lying around.

When you strike a rainy day in camp it's wonderful what a lot of wood you can use up."

"And it feels hunky to have plenty, I'm telling you," Bandy-legs admitted. "Now, while I'm thinking up what we ought to have for supper the rest of you might just as well get busy dragging all the loose wood to cover. It'll be good exercise, and give you a sharp appetite for the spread I'll set before you later on."

Perhaps the others may have considered that Bandy-legs was pretty "nervy" talking in this way, for he was known to be the poorest cook of the lot; but then he had been mysteriously hinting of late that he had been taking a course of lessons in cookery from the accomplished Nora who presided in the Griffin kitchen; and in consequence Max and Steve and Toby were quite curious to learn whether he could manage to get a decent meal together.

Things moved along smoothly, though several times Bandy-legs forgot just what the combination was, and had to call for help in order not to spoil the omelette he was making. In the end it proved to be a pretty decent supper he spread before them; and they agreed that his reputation as a *chef* had been considerably improved since the last time they were in the woods together up at Trapper Jim's place.

"I told you I could do it," Bandy-legs exultantly declared when they complimented him on his

success; "there isn't much I couldn't do if only I really and truly set out to try."

"I w-w-wish then you'd just make up your m-m-mind to try how strong that hickory s-s-sapling is," urged Toby, entreatingly. "It'd give me a h-h-heap of satisfaction to j-j-just satisfy my mind. You'd be about as h-h-hefty as a wolf or a tiger, you s-s-see; and if it dragged *you* up all r-r-right, it ought to w-w-work with them. P-p-please accommodate me, Bandy-legs."

But apparently his coaxing was of no avail.

"I'd like to do it all right, Toby, but while I'm not tired now like I was before, it's too soon after supper to be yanked around, and turned upside-down that way," Bandy-legs explained, seeming to be very reluctant.

"L-later on, mebbe, then?"

"Why, er, I'm afraid it might wake me up too much just before going to my blanket, you see, Toby. It's a bad thing to get too active when you ought to be hitting the hay, and feel dopey. I've heard my dad say so lots of times. Keeps you wakeful all through the first part of the night. But that trap's all right, I'm tellin' you, Toby. If only some animal big enough to jerk the bow free comes along and sets his hind foot in your loop, you're going to hear something drop."

"I know what I'm meaning to do," said Steve, firmly; "and that's to keep my gun handy, so if we get waked up by a lot of screeching, like the world was coming to an end, I'll be ready to crawl

out and wind up the career of the escaped menagerie beast, whatever it turns out to be."

"D-d-don't you be too q-q-quick on the trigger, Steve," pleaded Toby. "G-g-give us all a chance first to see what it's l-l-like. Mebbe we might want to keep it alive."

"What for?" demanded Steve, aggressively.

"A p-p-pet," replied Toby; "lots of p-p-people have pets, and think what it'd mean to me if I g-g-got a h-h-hyena in a c-c-cage."

"Yes, to be sure," scoffed the unconvinced Steve, "and also think what it would mean to all the neighbors too. According to my mind the only good hyena is a dead hyena. And if so be you ketch that sort in your bully trap I'm meaning to knock spots out of the same with a charge of buckshot. That goes, too, Toby, remember!"

CHAPTER XI

TOO TRICKY FOR TOBY

Later on Toby busied himself baiting his trap. Bandy-legs was invited to assist in the operation, but he declined. Perhaps he partly suspected the other had some sinister motive back of his invitation, and that when he least expected it that trailing loop would get twisted around one of his ankles, and his next step might precipitate an upheaval. Of course Toby could always declare that it must have been an accident; but his curiosity would have been satisfied at any rate. And Bandy-legs was firmly opposed to allowing himself to be experimented on. He had heard his father speak so many times of the horror of vivisection that somehow Bandy-legs seemed to have imbibed the idea that all experiments must be unpleasant.

At least it had not rained any at the time the boys sought their blankets; and some of the more sanguine began to hope it would prove to be a false alarm after all.

They had fixed things as well as they could, looking to a bad turn in the weather. If it did come they would have a sort of rustic shelter under which they could manage to keep their fire

going, and in that way get some warmth in the tent.

"Come along in, Toby, and quit your fussing out there!" Steve called, as he settled himself under his warm blanket, having chosen a position where he could duck out easily in case there came an alarm in the night.

"P'raps Toby's meaning to try his trap himself before he lays down," suggested Bandy-legs, a little viciously; "he'll sure never be happy till he knows whether it works or not. We'll take you down, Toby, if you get hung up by the hind leg."

"H-h-hind leg!" retorted Toby indignantly, "what d-d-do you take me for, anyhow? Mebbe you think I'm a c-c-cow or a j-j-jackass, but I ain't, all the s-s-same; I leave it to others to p-p-play such g-g-games."

As he came in shortly afterward it was apparent that Bandy-legs had counted without his host when he figured that Toby meant to test the working of his trap at his own expense. Toby was too smart for that, it seemed; and besides he doubtless had confidence in his arrangements.

"Here goes for a bully sleep," said Bandy-legs, as he coiled up under his cover, with his knees close to his chin, a favorite attitude with him; "and I hope nothing wakes me till morning."

"If you sleep as sound as you generally do," Max told him, "it would take a hurricane to bother you. If one came whooping along, and carried our tent up into the tree, the chances are

you'd open one eye and want to know who was making all that draught. You're a good sleeper, Bandy-legs, and your mother knows it, too."

"I believe in doing everything well," replied the other, sturdily. "When I eat I eat; and when the time comes to snooze take it from me I'm on the sleeping job from the word go. That's all you'll hear from me to-night, boys."

"Good!" said Steve, wickedly, "the rest of us can do a little thinking, then. Let it go at that, Bandy-legs; no reply needed. I'm expecting to go to sleep myself, for while I did say I meant to sit up and watch for that ham thief, since Toby's been so smart as to set a trap, what's the use?"

Presently all of them must have fallen asleep, to judge from the silence that hovered over the interior of the khaki-colored tent.

Some time passed by.

Then several heads suddenly projected from under as many blankets.

"What was that?" Max asked.

"My t-t-trap s-s-sprung!" gasped Toby.

"But what ails the beast that he don't let out a few howls?" demanded Steve, who was clawing desperately under his blanket, trying to find where he had placed his handy gun at the time he lay down.

"That's the funny part of it," Max declared; "if you've got your gun by now, Steve, let's crawl out and see what's doing."

The three of them hastened to do so, not know-

ing what they might see once they reached the open. Bandy-legs had as yet not stirred, and it really looked as if he meant to keep his word when he declared that nothing short of an earthquake or a cyclone would disturb him, once he got asleep.

As soon as the others huddled outside, and tried to focus their blinking eyes on their surroundings they discovered several things.

In the first place it had apparently not rained as yet, for the ground seemed to be perfectly dry. Then again, the fire had burned low, for it was giving only an apology of a light, and this flickered, and died down at intervals.

Max knew what should be the first duty, and stepping toward the fire he threw a handful of small trash on the coals. Immediately a flame sprang up, and the camp was fairly well illuminated.

Of course the boys all stared in the quarter where Toby had set that wonderful trap of his. If the hickory sapling had not been set free it would still be seen bent in the shape of a huge bow; but their first glance showed them that this was not the case.

"It's s-s-sprung!" said Toby, huskily.

Steve was holding his precious Marlin double-barrel gun so that he could raise it instantly and take aim.

"Yes," Max went on to say, with a touch of excitement in his voice as well as his manner,

"and I can see something swinging back and forward there!"

"Oh! whatever can it be?" Toby ventured, tremulously; and then as he imagined that he detected a slight movement on the part of Steve he flung out a hand and tried to shove the other's gun aside, adding: "Don't you d-d-do it, Steve! Why, it can't be a hyena, or anything d-d-dangerous to us, because d-d-don't you see it's held right up in the air. Let's rush in and keep the poor thing from being c-c-choked to d-d-death!"

The three of them advanced in a straight line, Max and Steve being armed, and apparently ready to do fell execution, should there be any necessity for action. But nothing happened. The swinging object continued to move back and forth, but none of them could detect any spasmodic kicking connected with it that would suggest the dying struggles of a wild beast that was being slowly but surely choked.

Then Max gave a laugh.

"Why, it isn't a beast at all, but the heavy pole Bandy-legs threw over here the time you accused him of wanting to spring your trap, Toby!" he announced; and as all of them gathered close to the now upright hickory sapling, it was seen that what Max declared was really so.

"Then Bandy-legs m-m-must have d-d-done this trick!" burst from Toby, who was apparently filled with indignation.

"Don't you believe it," Steve assured him;

"because we all heard it go off, and right then Bandy-legs was sound asleep alongside me. He's there yet, bundled up in his blanket."

"You think so, but you d-d-don't know for s-s-sure," spluttered Toby, distressed at the failure of his much vaunted trap to show results. "C-c-chances are if you went and looked you'd f-f-find he had a d-d-dummy there under his b-b-blanket all the time."

"Well, now," observed Max, frowning, "that never occurred to me before, and while I can hardly believe our chum would play such a prank on us, still you never can tell. So Toby, we appoint you a committee of one to go back into the tent and see if Bandy-legs is there or not."

"I will!" Toby responded, firmly, as though he meant to have the truth made manifest without any delay; and accordingly he hastened away from Max and Steve, who started in to learn the way in which the heavy pole had been seized by the loop.

Immediately Toby came running back, and his face looked more blank than ever.

"Well, did you find him there?" asked Max.

"Yep, and as d-d-dead to the w-w-world as anything," replied the stutterer, as he looked blankly at his two chums, and then toward the swinging pole, as though the puzzle had become more exasperating than ever.

Steve gave a low whistle, which was his way of expressing amazement.

"Say, that must be a wonderful old stick, all right!" he declared, jerking his thumb toward the object that was held in the tightened loop of rope.

"B-b-but you d-d-don't really think it j-j-jumped up all by itself, and g-g-got c-c-caught, do you?" Toby demanded, quite aghast.

"Well, hardly," said Max, though a little frown told that he too considered the enigma a nut hard to crack. "Something that had life about it made that stick do that trick; there's no doubt about that."

"Was it an animal or—a man?" Steve immediately asked, as he looked nervously around, and half raised his gun, as though he expected to see some ugly hobo advancing menacingly from the shelter of the forest.

Max was bending down, and evidently trying to examine the soil.

"I don't seem to see any tracks of a man here," he said; "and perhaps you've noticed that about all the bait Toby put out is gone!"

"C-c-cracky! that's so!" cried Toby, although up to then he had not thought to pay any attention to this important fact.

"Then some sort of animal must have been here," Max steadily affirmed. "It ate up the bait, and then must have either accidentally or on purpose poked that heavy stick into the loop, and sprung Toby's trap."

"Sure it must have been an accident, Max," objected Steve; "because it would have to be a

mighty smart animal, and a tricky one at that, to play such a sly game as using this stick to set the bent sapling free."

"I know it looks that way," Max went on to say; "but don't forget that the animal that threw the ham at your head from the tree *was* a tricky one. Some of those beasts belonging to the show are trained to do lots of queer things."

"Oh! if we're up against an *educated* animal," Steve admitted as though convinced against his will, "that might make a difference, because I've seen such do things I never would have believed any beast could be taught to perform. But he was keen enough to move all around here and never once get caught in the loop. Yes, chances are he knew what that was there for all the time; and having finished his supper, just to show us what he thought of such silly tricks he picks up this stick, gives it a hitch through the loop, jerks at the same, and there you are, with three half scared fellows crawling out of the tent expectin' to find a tiger held up by the hind quarters. This is what they call coming down from the sublime to the ridiculous, I think."

"It's all Bandy-legs' fault anyway!" muttered the disappointed Toby, as he commenced taking the pole out of the loop, as though he meant to reset his trap, hoping for better luck the next time.

"How do you make that out, I'd like to know?" asked Steve.

"Mebbe if he'd only been half way d-d-decent,

and l-l-let me try it out on him, this wouldn't have h-h-happened," Toby advanced, at which the other boys felt constrained to chuckle.

"Hard luck, old chap," said Steve; "we'll help you fix things up again, and p'raps you'll strike it different the next time."

That sort of talk helped Toby forget his keen disappointment, so that he actually brightened up somewhat.

"All right, Steve; that's k-k-kind of you. I was g-g-going to ask if you'd care to test the thing for me; but we kind of k-k-know what she can do now. The way it gripped this stick shows how it would h-h-hang on like grim d-d-death."

"I'm going to ask you as a special favor, boys, not to tramp around here any more than you can help," said Max.

"Which I take it means you hope to learn something from finding tracks, when you can see in the daylight; is that the answer, Max?" Steve asked.

"Yes, and when you set the trap keep on this side. I should think that whatever it was picked up the bait might have gone off that other way," Max continued, thoughtfully.

"Unless it came down the tree here, and went back the same way," Steve proposed. "We know already that the thief is a climber, don't we, Max?"

"You remember, Steve, that ham sailed out of a tree, and whizzed past your head," replied the

one whose opinion had been asked. "Yes, and I had a glimpse of some moving object up among the branches, even if it did slip away before I could see whether it had the stripes of a tiger, the spots of an ocelot, or the gray coat of our American panther."

"Gee! but this thing is getting some exciting, for a fact!" Steve admitted; "and we'll all feel a heap sight easier in our minds when we do know just what sort of critter it is hanging around our camp, and trying to make a living off our stock of good grub."

"But Bandy-legs isn't caring whether school keeps or not," suggested Max, as they plainly heard a loud snore from the direction of the tent, where the other chum was evidently sleeping soundly.

"He'll hardly believe us when we tell him in the morning what happened," Steve went on to say. "And now that we've gone and set the old spring trap again, there's not a single thing to show for it, unless we're lucky enough to get our game the second time around."

"S-s-shucks!" muttered Toby just then.

"What's the matter?" asked Max.

"D-d-don't believe the thing'll come again; it's r-r-raining right now."

"Only a few drops, Toby, and they never make a storm, you know," Steve informed him. "We don't want to see any rain, and for one I won't believe it's going to visit us till I see it pouring

cats and dogs. When it comes to the weather I never believe anything until it happens, and then like as not it turns out a fizzle."

"Well, there's no use of our staying out here to get wet," remarked Max; "so I move the meeting be adjourned. All in favor call out aye!"

Both the others were of the same mind, for they hastened to add their voices to that of Max. And accordingly all of them crawled back under the waterproof tent, content to let things move along as they pleased, and quite sure that no matter how the rain did come down they would find their covering faithful to its trust.

Bandy-legs still slept on, and he looked so young and innocent lying there doubled up in a knot that none of the others found the heart to disturb him, but sought their respective nooks, and tried to compose themselves once more for a good sleep.

CHAPTER XII

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

"WHAT's the prospect for the day, fellows?" Steve asked in a loud voice, as he sat up, after throwing aside his blanket.

It was morning, though the sun had not yet shown up. Three other heads appeared in view instantly, for the sleepers had been satisfied to cuddle in their warm coverings, on account of the chill of the night, which must have gradually crept into the tent around the early hours.

"Looks to me as though it hadn't rained much after all," Bandy-legs announced.

"T-t-things a little w-w-wet out there," remarked Toby, who had hastened to thrust his head part way through the opening near which he lay; "but it's all r-r-right, fellows, because I c'n see b-b-blue s-s-sky overhead."

They were soon dressed, and ready to begin the business of the day. The camp fire was not hard to start, thanks to their wisdom in procuring plenty of dry fuel when they had the chance; and breakfast began to send out appetizing odors that excited their appetites—though that was hardly necessary, since normal boys are always in condition to do their share of eating.

As usual they talked of various things while they sat around, each in his favorite attitude, disposing of the meal.

Bandy-legs seemed to have something on his mind, which he took this opportunity for venting, for when a little lull occurred in the conversation he turned to Max, and went on to say:

"After all we forgot something yesterday, Max."

"That so, Bandy-legs? Well, I hope it wasn't such a big thing that it'll upset any of our plans."

"T-t-tell us what?" Toby ventured, as well as he could, considering how full his mouth was of food.

"Oh! you're not in this, Toby," the other assured the stutterer; "and I'm not much s'prised at me forgetting, but it's queer Max should, because he nearly always remembers."

"Then it must have been something connected with the little excursion the two of us took yesterday?" Max guessed.

"Just what it was," said Bandy-legs. "We didn't think to ask Mrs. Ketcham about whether they kept a bull or not; and you know we said we would, because that might explain the awful growling noise we heard and which sounded like an escaped lion roaring."

Max laughed softly.

"I admit that we didn't bother asking her about it, Bandy-legs," he remarked; "but that was because there was no need."

"But why?" insisted the other, greedily.

"Oh! I happened to see the bull myself," replied Max, quietly.

"Pretty good evidence, that, I'd say," chuckled the amused Steve; "and so far as I c'n tell, your lamps are in good condition, Max. Seeing is believing, they say."

"And you didn't even bother to tell me, either; was that just fair?" the aggrieved Bandy-legs wanted to know.

"Well," Max told him, "it happened when you were helping Mrs. Ketcham do something with the eggs, and I guess I must have forgotten all about it afterwards, because we had a lot of other things to talk about. But happening to look out of the window in the direction of the barn I just glimpsed the heavy-set head of a big Jersey bull sticking out of a hole that must have been made in his stall so as to give him air. He was sniffing, as if he knew there were strangers around; but when I looked again he had drawn his head in, and so I forgot all about him."

Toby heaved a disappointed sigh.

"That knocks all my c-c-chances of g-g-gettin' an old he lion this trip!" they heard him mutter.

"Well, did you ever?" ejaculated Steve, staring hard at the other; "just think of the nerve of him, would you, expecting to bag a terrible man-eating lion in a trap like that! Honest now, I really believe Toby here'd be happy if he could only go home in a few days with a whole menagerie trailing behind him—elephant, rhinoceros, camel, lion,

tiger, and a ring-tailed monkey bringing up the rear."

"Oh! is that so?" Toby asked him, with a pretended sneer on his face; "and while you're about it, Steve, would you be so k-k-kind as to tell me what sort of a m-m-monkey that is? I never saw one in all my l-l-life."

"I guess you've got me there, Toby," laughed Steve; "because I never have, either, but I should say it was an ordinary monkey that could tie his tail up in knots whenever he wanted to keep it out of mischief, just like you turn up your trousers on a wet day."

They kept things humming until the meal was done; for every fellow had a desire to make his opinion known.

"Now what's the programme for to-day?" asked Max, as they untwisted themselves from their Turk-like sitting positions, and stretched to their full height.

"I'll tell you what I'm m-m-meaning to do," said Toby, "after we get d-d-done the breakfast d-d-dishes. F-f-frogs!"

"Oh! I see, you're worried about all that chorus work they kept up last night, and mebbe you think there were some who sang off-key, which bothers your musical ear, so you want to pick 'em out, and even things up," and Steve grinned as he said this, because he did not have as high an opinion of Toby's accomplishments in the line of music as he might.

"I'm not pretending to have any such c-c-classical n-n-notion," the accused one indignantly declared; "it's a c-c-case of dinner with me. I l-l-like frogs' legs, and they l-l-like me first-rate; so when things agree that way, what's the sense of k-k-keepin' 'em separate?"

"No use at all, Toby," admitted Steve, as though he had seen a great light, "and if you feel like growing a pair of frogs' legs in place of the ones you've got now, why, I wouldn't throw a thing in the way. Only I warn you it would be dangerous practicing singing frog songs by daylight."

Toby did not answer this thrust, only sniffed, and turned away.

Each of the others had a number of things scheduled for attention on this morning. The camp was in pretty good trim by now, but there always seems to be something that can be done in order to make it more cheerful; and Max was one of those fellows who like to potter around, making improvements.

Steve wanted to wander over in the direction of the farmhouse, and tried to find some good excuse for going; but the milk supply promised to hold out for the day, and they certainly would not need more eggs until the next morning.

The fact of the matter was he had heard the accounts of how Max and Bandy-legs had been so splendidly treated by Mrs. Ketcham with more or less envy; because it happened that Steve was

passionately fond of doughnuts of the old-fashioned New England cruller kind; and he hoped the farmer's wife might still have a nest of the same in her big stone crock.

He even suggested that possibly Bandy-legs might like to go with him, so as to take a picture of the big watchdog that had given him such a lively time, in order to keep the adventure green in his memory. But having other things laid out for that morning to keep him busy, the other chum respectfully but firmly declined to be coaxed into making a four mile tramp, when there was really no need of it.

So poor disappointed Steve had to give up for that day his hope of obtaining any of those choice doughnuts.

"And chances are," he was heard to mutter to himself as he started to get busy with something or other, "they'll be clean eaten up by another day; but that's always my luck when doughnuts are around. It's too mean for anything."

However Steve was too good-natured a fellow to remain gloomy very long at a stretch, and in ten minutes they heard him trolling a comical ditty as he worked away, showing that his "doughnut fever" had calmed down sensibly.

Meanwhile Toby after awhile made ready to wander over in the direction of the pond where that frog chorus inspired him with high hopes of reaping a bountiful harvest.

He had arranged a long stout pole, with a short

line and a hook at the small end. This latter he ornamented with a piece of bright red flannel some two inches square and supplied by Max, which he was wise enough to tie securely to the shank of the hook, well up from the barb, but so it concealed the point.

He also carried the trouting basket slung over his shoulder by the canvas strap, and made sure that his hunting knife had a good edge to it, for he meant to fix the frogs as he took them, thus saving himself more or less of a burden in carrying the useless portions along with him.

"Steve, would you m-m-mind doing me a g-g-great favor?" Toby asked, as he stood there all ready to make a start.

"Sure I wouldn't mind, Toby; what is it?" the other asked quickly.

"I'd like to c-c-carry your g-g-gun along with me," said Toby.

"Not to shoot frogs with, I hope?" remarked Bandy-legs, in high scorn.

"K-k-keep out of this, p-p-please, Bandy-legs," the other told him. "Steve knows I wouldn't be g-g-guilty of doing that. But you see, a feller can't tell what he might run up against these d-d-days, when there's some k-k-kind of mysterious animal p-p-prowlin' around. D-d-did you s-s-say yes, Steve?"

"You're as welcome to the little Marlin as flowers in spring, Toby," Steve told him; "and here, put several more shells in your pocket. Remem-

ber I've got a couple with buckshot loaded in the barrels right now. If so be you *have* to use the gun, be sure you know what you're banging away at, because they'd have you up for murder if you hit a poor man with that charge."

"Oh! I'll be careful, sure I will, Steve; and t-t-thank you ever so m-m-much for lending it to me," with which the overjoyed Toby shouldered the weapon, and started forth.

"Sure you know where the pond lies, do you?" asked Max; "and don't forget that the camp is due southeast of the same. When you start home take your bearings, and if you're in doubt even once, give us a whoop. Sometimes its possible to get lost in the woods, and that means a heap of trouble, don't it, Bandy-legs?"

"Well, if you change that to a swamp I can say yes, all right, because I have been there, and know," was the answer the query brought out.

But Toby had no such fear. He had spent considerable time in the open, so that he had learned many useful lessons, though he sometimes did allow himself to grow more or less careless. The pond was not so very far away but what he could make those by the campfire hear if he wished to shout; and surely a fellow must be a fool who could get lost under such conditions.

He made a bee-line through the woods, as nearly as the nature of the undergrowth would allow such a thing. Before long he had arrived in sight of the pond, which he was pleased to see

covered many acres, and had the appearance of a splendid haunt for great big greenbacked frogs.

He could hear them grunting in various places, and this made Toby's heart beat high with hope, for he was especially fond of the sport; though not cruel enough to have indulged in it just for the sake of killing the high jumpers; but the thought of the feasts to come spurred him on to do his best.

It is not always the easiest thing in the world to circumvent a shrewd old grandfather frog who has long grown suspicious of everything that walks on two feet. To crawl up close enough to him to softly push your pole far out, so that the red lure dangles in front of his nose and within a few inches, often requires considerable labor, and necessitates more or less skill as well.

Toby soon became intensely interested in his work. He would stand the gun up against a certain tree while he ranged the immediate shore, and possibly made several captures. It was not long before he was sorry he had bothered fetching the firearm at all, because there seemed no reason for doing so, and it made him many unnecessary steps.

His success was phenomenal, and for an hour he kept moving around the edge of the pond, the banks of which were heavily wooded for the most part.

By that time he had almost two dozen "saddles" in his trout creel, and it was beginning to

bother him by feeling heavy; as well as slipping forward while he crept along on hands and knees, in order to get close to some monster who seemed suspicious, and had to be approached carefully.

Finally Toby fell into the habit of leaving the basket along with his gun. When he made a capture he would immediately kill the frog, and toss him over to where these things lay, if within throwing distance. Then, when ready to move further on it was his habit to dress those victims he had gathered meanwhile, after which he allowed himself to be tempted to proceed "just a little further." That is always the way when frog-hunting; one may decide that he has really obtained enough for the time being; but then the conditions may never be as good again; and some of the spoils can easily be kept over until another day by immersing them in cold water.

So Toby toiled on, creeping, sliding, crawling, and doing about everything an active, ambitious hunter might, in pitting his powers against a wary species of quarry that had only to make one big jump in order to baffle all his plans.

Finally he knew that the creel would not hold many more of those big "saddles," and accordingly Toby promised himself that he would surely stop when he had taken just five, in addition to those already bagged.

Three times he tossed a victim over to the bank, where he could see the gun and the basket. A fourth fell into his hands after a long steal

through some reeds, and having put an end to the victim's struggles, Toby turned to throw him to the bank, after which he would look for the very last frog he meant to take.

He did not throw that defunct jumper, however, although his hand was drawn back to make the cast. Instead Toby stood there staring, a wrinkle stealing between his eyes just above his nose, as it always did when the boy was puzzled.

"Now, what's that m-m-mean?" he grumbled to himself, as he started post-haste toward the bank. "Mebbe Steve's come out to s-s-see how I'm doing, and he's j-j-just snuck my b-b-basket away for f-f-fun. There's the g-g-gun aleanin' 'gainst that tree all right, but where's my b-b-bully lot of f-f-frogs, I want to know?"

And indeed it was just as Toby said; for the shotgun could be plainly seen where he had laid it, against the base of a tree-trunk; but the trout creel filled almost to the lid with the delicious white meat "saddles" of his many victims had mysteriously vanished!

CHAPTER XIII

THE SECRET OUT

When he presently managed to reach the spot he was aiming for Toby was pretty much all out of breath. He had been forced to exert himself considerably in order to get that last victim; and then came this sudden call upon his energies.

He stared all around him, but could not see any sign of mischievous Steve. The trees were for the most part too small to very well conceal any one behind their trunks, it being every bit second-growth timber.

"Steve, l-l-let up on that f-f-foolin', and b-b-bring me back my b-b-basket of b-b-bully f-f-frogs' legs, won't you, please?"

Toby called this out fairly loud, having by now managed to partly recover his lost breath. He waited, and hoped to see the laughing face of his chum thrust itself into view; but nothing happened.

Then Toby began to grow alarmed. He reached down, and snatched the gun from its resting-place alongside the tree-trunk; after which he pulled back both hammers with trembling thumb, while he scanned his surroundings. His eyes were distended, and there was an anx-

ious glow in them; just as though the boy half expected that a savage striped jungle tiger would suddenly make a leap from out the branches of a pine tree near by, and seek to pounce upon him.

But although he scanned each neighboring harbor of refuge earnestly he saw not a sign of a yellow form lying on a limb, and watching him hungrily.

Toby all at once became eager to call his chums to the spot. There seemed to be a strange mystery attached to this sudden disappearance of his prized trophies, which he could not begin to understand. One minute the creel had been here in full view, and when he looked again, lo and behold, it was gone!

He at least had the good sense to stop long enough before starting to make sure that he was going to run in the right direction; and then he used his legs to the best advantage.

All the time he was trying to sprint as though engaged in a road race with some of the best runners in Carson High athletic circles, Toby kept looking to the right and to the left, and then behind him; for he more than half anticipated that this retreat on his part might spur the unknown enemy on to attacking him.

However, he drew near the camp without anything happening. Now he could hear the voice of Steve again trolling some ditty, while Bandylegs called out to ask Max a question.

This would seem to prove that the whole three

of them were there. It also added to the mystery; because all along Toby had kept saying to himself he half expected to learn that Steve was absent, and that neither of the others knew where he had wandered; for this would make it appear as though after all Steve might be the cause of the strange vanishing of the trout creel.

But now that prop was knocked out from under Toby's feet. Hence his face looked pale and somewhat peaked as he hurried over to where the khaki-colored tent stood, with the smouldering fire close by.

"Hello! here's our frog-hunter come back, and I hope he's met with good luck in the bargain!" Max called out, and then as he noticed first that Toby looked somewhat frightened, and second that he was not carrying the trout creel over his shoulder as might be expected, he went on to exclaim: "Why, what's happened to you, Toby? Where's your basket?"

Now Toby, as the reader knows, was likely to get his tongue dreadfully twisted in all sorts of strange knots if he tried to speak in a hurry, when very much excited. That was just what happened now; and Steve had to thump him on the back with considerable energy before he made the accustomed sign that he had succeeded in getting control over his vocal chords again.

"B-b-basket's gone!" was the shot he fired at them as soon as he could speak.

"What d'ye mean, Toby?" asked Steve, frown-

ing; "gone and lost my trout creel in some mud bed, and can't find it again? I ought to be glad you didn't let the Marlin follow suit."

" 'Tain't that!" declared the other, with an intaking of his breath; "it's been h-h-hooked, that's what!"

Max saw that he would have to take a hand in the matter so as to get at the facts without any more delay; for Steve's methods were apt to simply excite Toby more and more, and that meant a further thickness of speech.

"Tell us what happened, Toby," he said, with the little touch of authority in his voice that his position as the leader of the party permitted, and which was always respected by the other chums.

"That's j-just what I want to do, Max," Toby went on to say, after swallowing once or twice in a peculiar way he had when trying hard to get a grip on himself. "You s-s-see, I got to leavin' the b-b-basket on the b-b-bank along with the gun. I had her near c-c-crammed full of the f-f-finest saddles you ever saw, too. Then just when I g-g-got to next to the last jumper I m-m-meant to take, s-s-say, when I looked before throwin' that f-f-frog ashore the b-b-basket wasn't there!"

"Sure you didn't misplace it, Toby?" asked Max, who could not forget that the other had a little failing in the way of meaning to do certain things, and then going right off to attempt something just the opposite.

"N-n-not any, Max," persisted Toby, trucu-

lently; "she was there p-p-plain as the nose on Steve's face here, when I threw that third f-f-frog ashore; but when I looked again, nixey, she was g-g-gone!"

"We'll have to go over there with you, and investigate this thing," Max announced with a frown. "If there's anybody hiding up in these woods and trying to play mean tricks on us we want to know it right away. We're too far off for any of the town boys to be trying to bother us; and I don't think any country fellow would take the chances of being caught and pounded. It must be some sort of animal!"

"That's what I thought it was, Max!" Toby declared, not deeming it worth while to explain how at first he had imagined one of them might be playing a joke on him.

"Ought we to leave the camp unprotected?" Bandy-legs asked.

"I'll fasten the tent flap, so nothing can get in, and it'll be all right," Max told him; which intelligence pleased the other very much indeed, for he imagined that they might hit upon him to stay behind, and Bandy-legs had as much desire to be in the hunt as the next one.

Accordingly the four boys started on a run toward the distant pond. Toby led the van, because he had already been over the ground twice, and ought to know where he was going better than any one else. Still, it was Max who on several occasions managed to get Toby to veer a lit-

tle to the right. He was keeping his eyes on the tracks made by Toby in approaching the camp; and knew just when the latter deviated from his former course, as one will naturally lean to the right unless guarding against this tendency.

Even after they arrived at the water they were compelled to continue on for quite a distance, because the frog hunter had covered considerable ground while keeping up his sport.

"There's your fishing pole leaning up against that tree, I think, Toby," remarked Max, finally.

"Yes, that's so," replied the other. "I c-c-chucked it there before I lit out, so's to have a m-m-mark to see when I came b-b-back again."

"And is that the place where you saw your basket last?" asked Steve.

"It sure is!" Toby declared, half holding up his right hand as though he fancied himself in the witness chair, and bound to give facts exactly as they were. "And l-l-looky here, will you, s-s-see where the gun stood up against the tree trunk? Well, the b-b-basket lay over by that clump of g-g-grass."

Max immediately stepped over and bent down.

"He's right about that, fellows," he announced; "because here you can plainly see where the basket lay on the ground, for it left an impression."

"It ought to," burst out Toby, convincingly; "because it was h-h-heavy enough to m-m-make a m-m-mark anywhere."

All of them could see what Max referred to. The basket had undoubtedly lain there on the bank. Max looked all around him, then up toward the tree overhead. In this case the lower branches were at least ten feet from the ground; and he mentally calculated that no animal, however long its reach, could have possibly stretched down and secured that basket.

That would mean there should be some chance for discovering telltale imprints near by. Max was unusually clever with regard to such things; and always thought of them first when there was a mystery of this kind afoot.

"Keep where you are, everybody, please, for just a minute or two," he went on to say; "that is, don't move around more than you can help; and use your eyes to help locate the tracks left by this *thing,* whatever it may be."

"Oh! a good idea, Max!" burst from Toby; "now, why didn't I think of that before I put for the c-c-camp?"

Nobody gave him an answer, but doubtless Steve deep down in his heart was saying, "Because you were badly rattled, I guess, my boy; and wanted to meet up with some of the rest of the crowd too much, that's what."

After all it was Max who discovered what he sought. They heard him give utterance to a low exclamation, as though of surprise; then he was seen to bend down and closely examine something.

The others crowded close to their leader, and

three pairs of hungry eyes were fastened upon the ground. Toby gave a cry of mingled astonishment and disgust.

"W-w-why, would you believe it," he gasped, "after all it was a silly little b-b-baby, and barefooted at that, g-g-got away with the b-b-basket! Oh! rats!"

Both Steve and Bandy-legs were staring at the plain imprint of a foot, and such a queer foot too, long and slender.

"Max, what's the answer?" begged Steve; "it don't seem possible that that track was ever made by any baby like Toby says."

"It wasn't," the other told him, with a smile; "that was a full-grown monkey, and I should think he would stand about as high as Bandy-legs here!"

"A m-m-monkey!" echoed Toby, scratching his head; "and that was what stole our f-f-fine h-h-ham the f-f-first night we camped here, was it, and threw the s-same at Steve's head? Oh! my s-s-stars, a real live monkey. I w-w-wonder now if it's got a r-r-ringed tail like Steve said."

"But looky here, Max," interposed Bandy-legs, "monkeys don't eat fish and frogs, do they? I understood they lived on nuts and roots and fruit."

"So they do, as near as I can say," acknowledged Max; "although there may be a species that does eat animal food, though I doubt it. This fellow has lived pretty much all his life in

the circus, and is as tricky as they make them. He watched Toby here working, and wondered what he had so good in that basket; so when the chance came he just dropped down and made away with it."

Toby began to scan the neighboring trees as though he half expected to see a grinning hairy face projected through the branches and leering at him.

"But after he looks in and sees what's there, he might drop the basket, mightn't he, Max?" Steve inquired.

"I think there's a fair chance that way, Steve; and so let's look around. Each choose a certain territory to cover; but don't wander *too* far away; and remember our old signal for assembling in a hurry. Whoever finds the creel give the Indian whoop twice. Once for trouble, and help wanted. Now scatter!"

They had done this sort of thing many times in days gone by, and were pretty well trained for service. Following the idea Max suggested, they headed in four different points of the compass, though the pond being behind cut out half the circle, and shortened their labors considerably.

Barely three minutes had gone by than a whoop rang out, coming from the quarter where Steve had gone. The others raised their heads eagerly and listened, for if no second call followed it would mean that the one who signalled needed assistance in a hurry. But almost immediately

there came a second cry, proving that the missing basket had been found.

A minute later and they were clustered there, examining the trout creel. It had been opened, for part of its contents had vanished; but when Toby began to discover fine frogs' "saddles" scattered on the ground, he started to collect them in great haste.

"Seemed like the monk must have been disgusted when he opened the basket, after climbing a tree here, and found that he didn't fancy the smell of what it held," Steve gave as his opinion.

"And I guess Toby is likely to get about all his frog supplies back again," Max went on to say, in a satisfied way; "so that none of us have any kick coming."

"That old sneak fools himself more than a few times, don't he?" Bandy-legs remarked, as if beginning to see the comical side of the affair. First there was the half ham which he couldn't take a fancy to after he stole it, and now here he's gone and cribbed a lot of frogs' legs that he throws away. It must be just a habit with him to steal. He can't help it when the temptation rises. I'd call him a kleptomaniac, wouldn't you, Max?"

"Yes," Toby hastened to remark, out of his turn, "that's what he must be, but you'll have to excuse m-m-me from s-s-sayin' the same, because it'd sure take m-m-me a year of Sundays puckerin' up my l-l-lips to try."

"Now, if you had a chance to capture a monkey, Toby, it wouldn't be near so silly as hoping to bag a great big lion, or a strong tiger that could bat us all over with one stroke of his paw," Steve advised the boy who yearned to be the proud possessor of a menagerie of his own.

"Well, p'raps I may b-b-before we leave here," Toby calmly went on to say, "that is, if the rest of you g-g-give me a h-h-helping hand."

"You can count on that, Toby," Max assured him, for everybody felt vastly better, now that the worst seemed known; "but since we've found what was lost, and made an important discovery, let's hike back to our camp, where we can talk it all over, and settle on our plan of campaign."

"Yes," Bandy-legs remarked, "and while that slippery customer is hanging around here nothing's going to be safe from him. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if the old sneak had paid a visit to our tent while we've been investigating up here; and poking his nose into every package we've got there, hoping to find some peanuts, or something else he likes particularly well," and this prospect sent the boys on the full run over the short-cut between the pond where the frogs held their nightly chorus, and the camp.

CHAPTER XIV

A PLOT AGAINST THE MISSING LINK

"EVERYTHING'S lovely, and the goose hangs high!" sang out Steve, when they had once more arrived in camp, to find things just as they had been left, with no sign of tampering on the part of the inquisitive and perhaps hungry monkey.

"It's all right, because no damage was done, since Toby got back his stolen high jumpers," Bandy-legs announced.

"Yes, and he's agoin' to have p-p-part of the s-s-same for lunch, understand?" declared the late frog fisherman; "and say, Max, you never did see such c-c-crazy antics in all your life as when they f-f-found that red rag had a jag in it. Great g-g-governor! how they'd try to c-c-crawl up the string backwards, or any old way. Near died alaughin' at the s-s-same; then I reckoned it was kind of c-c-cruel to keep 'em sufferin' so, and I'd knock 'em on the head. 'Bout time I g-g-got busy with the fryingpans, ain't it?"

No one told him to "hold his horses," for they were only too well pleased nowadays when Toby offered to take upon himself the getting of a meal, since he had proved his ability to do fair camp

cooking. Time was when they would have utterly refused to let him try his hand, because they knew how he would spoil everything he attempted to serve up; but times had changed apparently, and Nora's lessons were bearing fruit.

It was just as well that Toby cooked an unusual amount of stuff for luncheon, because it happened that the camp was destined to have visitors before they had gotten very far along with the meal.

Perhaps the smoke made by their fire attracted attention, for the first thing the boys knew they heard the sound of voices somewhere near, and belonging to men at that.

They looked up at each other, and Bandy-legs was the first to express an opinion.

"Say, I wouldn't be s'prised now, if it's Farmer Ketcham and one of his hired men acomin' over to see us about something."

"Whew!" exclaimed Steve, "I hope his old bull hasn't broke loose now, and is on the rampage. Seems to me as if we had about enough to bother with, as things stand, without having a bull tearing in on us any old time; and Toby here wearing that red bandana around his neck all the time, trying to make believe he's a cowboy from out on the plains."

"There they come!" said Max, pointing as he spoke.

A few seconds later, and Toby uttered a loud cry.

"Why, I d-d-declare if 'tain't M-m-mister Jenks!" he announced.

"Jenks!" echoed Steve; "seems like I ought to know that name; heard it somewhere or other. Who is he, Toby, and where'd you meet him?"

"Why, d-d-don't you remember, boys, he owns the c-c-circus!"

"Oh! sure, that's a fact!" Steve exclaimed, "and you had some mighty pleasant dealings with him, too, didn't you, Toby? Fifty plunks was it he paid you because you sent in the first news about his missing animals? Mebbe he's changed his mind, and wants that hard cash back again—followed you all the way up here to coax you to pan out. Mebby he thinks he needs it in his business."

But Toby shrugged his shoulders, and smiled in a way that proved he felt pretty sure the journey would have been taken for nothing, should such prove to be the case.

"I can give a guess what brings Mr. Jenks up here," interrupted Max; "and it's got some connection with our torment, that trained monkey. But they're waving their hands to us right now, and coming this way; so we'll soon know all about it."

The two men soon reached the camp. Mr. Jenks it was, just as Toby had said, and the party with him seemed to be a farmer, who might possibly live within a few miles of the place.

"Glad to see you again, my boy!" exclaimed the proprietor of the circus, as he held out his big hand to Toby; "and I must say this looks like a good omen to me, meeting you away up here, after you had so much to do with finding the rest of my stock. I'm shy just one fine educated monkey, the famous Link who's said to be the Missing Link, which he is right now, at least. Thought I could get on without him, but it seems that the show has lost its salt without his tricks. Everybody calling for Link, and attendance falling off when we can't produce him. So when I had a letter from this party here, Mr. Caleb Kline, who owns a farm not far away, telling me he had been visited by a big monkey that chattered, and stole like all get-out, I just made up my mind I'd come back and make a big effort to locate him. It'll be two hundred dollars in any one's pocket to capture Link."

"Won't you both sit down, and have a bite of lunch?" asked Max, feeling that it was really up to them to act as hosts on such an occasion.

Mr. Jenks looked at his companion.

"Might as well, Kline, seeing that your place is a good ways off; and we don't want to go back till dark, because that boy said he saw the monkey up in this region day before yesterday. Scared him nearly to death, the boy thinking he meant to eat him up; but Link only wanted to make friends, for he's a social chap sometimes."

Steve laughed at that.

"As full of mischief as an egg is of meat, sir!" he declared.

"What's that, have you seen him, then?" demanded Mr. Jenks, eagerly.

"Oh! he's hanging out somewhere near by, and we've had a couple of experiences with the sly rascal," Steve continued. "First time he stole half a ham, and when we were looking around in the night he flung it at my head, and nearly knocked my brains out, only I was saved by not having it hit me."

"Well, that's interesting—not the fact of your having brains, my son, but what you tell me about Link's scandalous conduct. He's a slick one, I assure you," the circus man went on to say, his face beaming with satisfaction at thus striking a warm clue so early in the hunt.

"Yes," broke out Toby, anxious to get in the spot-light as well as Steve; "and right this very morning, after I'd f-f-fished for f-f-frogs over at the p-p-pond a half mile away, and left my b-b-basket full of saddles under a tree, would you believe m-m-me, that old m-m-monk slipped up and run away with the s-s-same? C-c-course we found it again, 'cause m-m-monkeys don't f-f-fancy f-f-fish; and we saw tracks as p-p-plain as anything that looked like a b-b-baby'd been there, which was his m-m-marks, you know."

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised, now!" declared Mr. Jenks, "but what you boys will be after me to claim that two hundred yet. Link seems to

have taken a fancy to you in some way, and is hanging around your camp. Now, my time is nearly up, and unless I gather him in this afternoon I'm afraid I'll have to leave here. I'm meaning to let you write down where the show'll be every day for two weeks; and you can reach me there if you do happen to take the monkey in."

He looked meaningly at Toby when saying this. Somehow Mr. Jenks seemed to have an idea that the boy who loved to collect wild animals must be the leader of the little group of campers. This arose partly through his having had former dealings with Toby Jucklin, whom he had at least found to be fairly shrewd at making a bargain.

It quite tickled Toby to have this honor thrust upon him for once in his life; and as Max could see no harm in the mistake he allowed it to go on. After all it mattered very little, since they were all chums; and what was one's business was the concern of all. And Toby seemed to be enjoying the sensation so much that his face was fairly flushed.

"We'll t-t-try to d-d-do our best, sir," Toby went on to say, feeling that it was up to him to act as spokesman, when his relations with Mr. Jenks made him so pronounced a factor in the deal.

"He's so tricky, though," observed Steve, "that you mustn't count on our being able to bring him to terms. Monkeys can bite and

scratch terrible, if they once get mad, can't they, Mr. Jenks?"

The two men were sitting down alongside, and each enjoying the contents of a pannikin placed before them, containing a fair supply of all that the boys had had for their meal, as well as a brimming cup of coffee with all the "fixings."

"Yes, and I wouldn't advise you to trust too much to Link, for while he's full of fun, at the same time there's rank treachery in his make-up; so that he may turn like a flash on the hand that pets him, and use his little sharp teeth. But there's one safe way to capture him, and which we meant to employ in case we could learn where he was holding out."

"Would you mind explaining it to us, Mr. Jenks?" asked Max.

"Certainly not, son, and I mean to leave some of the material with you to use, if you get the chance. Like as not Link will keep on hanging out near your camp; and if I could remain up here longer I'd just stay here, and take my chances. You see the little bag Kline carries? Well, that contains nuts, and dried bread. I've got a bottle of strong liquor along, and we expected to follow the tactics of nearly all wild animal catchers who go out after monkeys."

"I think I know what you mean, sir," said Max; "but perhaps you'll explain a little further?"

"They know the confiding nature of the climbers," continued the circus proprietor, promptly, "and when they reach a place in the woods where they know they are apt to strike a colony of monkeys, they take a number of gourd calabashes and place a certain amount of nuts and bread, soaked in the whiskey, in each, then hide near by to watch results.

"Pretty soon the troop of monkeys come along, and scenting something good to eat, proceed to fill up on the dosed stuff. It seems pretty hard to take advantage of a weakness that they appear to have in common with the other branch of the two-legged family, don't it? But every time they get so stupid that they stagger all around, and seem to lose all fear of mankind. Then one of the watchers will step out, take hold of a monkey's hand, and lead a whole string of them away, each trying to support the others. And so they walk into cages, and upon recovering from their spree find themselves shut up for life."

"If men only had to pay as dear for their first offense, there'd be a heap less of drinking done, you hear me," remarked the farmer, who had evidently heard the description before, and yet still marveled at its ingenuity, as well as thought it pretty hard on the poor monkeys.

"You can leave the stuff with us, Mr. Jenks," said Max, and now the other realized he was dealing with the real leader of the camping party; "but I won't promise to use it unless we really

have to. Somehow I don't exactly like the idea, though I suppose it's all right for those animal catchers to do anything at all in order to make their trip pay, because with them it's a business. But that isn't true with us boys. Perhaps we may find another way to get Link; it'll give us something to think about, and if we succeed it ought to be a feather in our caps."

"And two hundred dollars in your pockets, don't forget that, son," the circus man said, impressively. "Seems like the more I get to thinking about that monkey the less I want to lose him. It took a long time to teach him what tricks he knows, and he's always been a big drawing card to my show. I certainly hope we manage to corral him in some way. And so far as I'm concerned I'd as soon get him soaked as not, so long as I lay hands on him. It wouldn't be the first time either that he knew what strong drink is, because I'm sorry to say the man I hired to look after Link especially, used to be very fond of his bottle, and he must have taught the monkey to like the vile stuff. He's the silliest thing, when on a jag, you ever saw, and does act too comical for anything."

"I can see from that it would be an easy thing to tempt poor old Link with some of the stuff, sir," Max went on to say; "and if we fail in every other way we'll just have to come down to what you suggest; because the animal would die in the winter if left at large in this cold country.

Either emigration or captivity is the only thing to save him."

"Sensible talk, son," the circus man told Max. "And to tell the truth I'm so sure you boys will be successful that I'm tempted to turn right back, and get an early train for Greenburg, so as to be with my show to-night. Things go wrong when the old man is away. It's a one-man concern at best. Nobody knows what to do in an emergency but me. Yes, Kline, after we're done eating take me back to your house, and then to the station again for the first train. I'll gladly pay you wha' I promised, and then wait to hear from these bright lads."

Of course this sort of talk gave the four chums more than a few pleasant thrills because everybody likes to know that they are appreciated at their true worth.

"That would m-m-mean another f-f-fifty for me, wouldn't it?" Toby was heard to say, reflectively, as though the prospect might seem quite pleasing, and he wondered whether he might not be able to save up, and after a little while augment the number of animals in his collection, after he had removed it from the back yard of the family residence out to the Jucklin farm.

While the two guests were finishing their meal there was more or less further talk, all bearing upon the different ways in which men who make it their business in life to trap wild animals, go about it out in the jungles and dark forests of the

countries where such may still be found in profitable numbers to pay them to go to such enormous expense.

The boys listened, and learned considerable that was deeply interesting about the habits of these bold adventurers. Since the moving picture enterprise came into its own there have been many faithful pictures shown of how these beasts of prey live in their native lands; and the boys had even had the privilege of seeing some very fine flashlight pictures that showed all manner of untamed animals at large, so that this talk with an old traveler like Mr. Jenks was unusually interesting.

Finally the two men announced themselves ready to go back to the Kline farmhouse.

"Remember, now, boys," said Mr. Jenks, as he went around shaking every fellow heartily by the hand, "you're going to wire as soon as you get back to town, and tell me what luck you've had. I'll be ready to jump on the next train and come back to Carson, bringing that two hundred with me; because I know you're going to turn the trick on the Missing Link. Be good to yourselves, now, and here's wishing you the best of luck," and with that he passed from their sight.

CHAPTER XV

THE BATTLE OF WITS

After that Toby seemed to have but one object in life, which was to hatch up a clever scheme whereby the educated monkey could be trapped. He wandered around in the near vicinity of the camp, with his eyes constantly searching the branches of the trees in the vague hope that he might discover the runaway snugly squatted in some crotch and fast asleep.

"I believe Toby's got an idea he's able to jabber monkey talk," said Steve, after the day was fairly well spent, and they could hardly coax Toby to come in to his midday meal, much less do his share of cooking; "and that he expects, if only he might find where that slick old Link holds out, he could pan-handle him, and get him to come into camp with us."

"Now you're hewing pretty close to the line," commented Bandy-legs, "and I'll let you know why. Toby's got a handful of the nut stuff in his pocket. I saw him get it out of the bag the circus man left with us. And I just bet you he's thinking of tempting Link with it."

Steve jumped up and stepped into the tent; he

came out again with a broad grin on his face.

"I was mistaken, glad to say!" he remarked.

"About what?" Max asked him.

"Well, when Bandy-legs here said Toby was running around with a pocket full of the nut meat, it struck me that perhaps he'd scooped that bottle of hard stuff too, which Mr. Jenks said we might use to soak, first the dry bread and then Link. But the country is safe, for he never touched it."

"None of us have seen or heard anything of the monkey since he stole Toby's basket of frog legs this morning," ventured Max; "and it may be he's left us—cleared out in disgust because what he steals here doesn't seem to touch the right spot with him."

"Don't mention that to Toby, or you'll give him the blind staggers," said Steve; "because he's set his mind on capturing the monk; and when Toby gets a thing in that head of his he's a mighty unhappy fellow if he can't carry it through."

"What d'ye think," Bandy-legs went on to say, "I heard him grumbling to himself, and seems like he was wondering whether he couldn't keep the old monkey and let the two hundred go glimmering. Actually thinks more about an old rascal of a Simian than a handful of plunks. But we're three to one, and we'll see to it that no such fool deal as that goes through."

"No danger of it," chirped Steve, briskly;

"that circus man thinks more than two hundred of Link; and five times that wouldn't tempt him to let the monkey slip through his fingers. Think of him coming away back here in hopes of bagging the slippery old scamp! No, if we do get hold of that Missing Link he's going to keep on amusing the circus public, and not just Toby Jucklin."

When the afternoon came to an end they managed to get the restless Toby to come in near the campfire; but it was impossible for him to talk, or even think of any other subject than capturing the stray monkey.

Max had considered the subject, and arrived at a sensible conclusion. They had really come out just to break the ice for the new season, and without any definite object in view save to enjoy the open air, and renew some of their pleasures of camp life.

It would be as well for them to spend some of their time in inventing ingenious traps calculated to ensnare the trick monkey. This would be pitting their smartness against that of a suspicious and clever animal; and if they won out why it would be reckoned not only a glorious triumph but at the same time put a nice little sum of good money in their pockets.

He announced this policy as they were finishing their supper, and the others had to smile to see the look of ecstatic joy that spread all over Toby's face.

"Oh! that's just fine of you boys to stand by me like that!" he burst out with, and not tripping even once, strange to say. "I'll never forget it, give you my word I won't. And some time I'll find a chance to pay you back, see if I don't."

"Hear! hear!" cried Steve.

"Bravo!" exclaimed Max.

"Good stuff, Toby," remarked Bandy-legs, "and he never fell all over himself once, you notice, fellers."

"Of course," Max continued, "we don't know whether we'll have another chance to see Link. He may have kicked the dust of these parts off his feet, and started out to find easier picking among the farmers' houses, where he could sneak in and loot the kitchens while the missus was out gathering eggs, or hanging up the wash. But if we can coax him to stay around our camp we'll keep on hoping to get him in the end."

"But, Max," ventured Steve, "if all our smart traps go begging, and he gives us the merry ha! ha! every time, wouldn't you try that monkey-catcher trick the circus man told us about?"

"I've been thinking it over," said Max, "and while I'd much prefer to take Link by some fairer scheme, if he is too sharp for us, why I reckon we'll have to turn to that way. If he isn't captured he could live by stealing through the summer, but when the cold weather came the poor beast would freeze to death, because he's a native of a hot climate, you know."

"G-g-good for you, Max!" exclaimed Toby, beaming with joy; "oh! I know now we'll g-g-get Link in the end. And to coax him to hang out around here r-r-right along I've g-g-gone and b-b-baited the place."

"How?" questioned Bandy-legs.

"I h-h-hunted up some likely p-p-places where I just thought he'd be apt to come and I p-p-put a few kernels of nuts in the crotch, each one closer to the camp. You k-k-know that's the way they ketch wild t-t-turkeys, make a t-t-trap of lathes, and have a road leading into the same, comin' up in the m-m-middle, covered over just inside. Then they strew corn all along and up onto the t-t-trap. Mister T-t-turk he starts pickin' up the g-g-grains, and is so busy that he f-f-follows on till he comes up inside the slats. Then he g-g-gets so excited that he just runs around and around, tryin' to p-p-poke his old head through the bars, and never once rememberin' that he came up in the m-m-middle!"

"Well, now, that wasn't a half-way bad idea of yours, Toby, to bait a line with the nut meat, so's to coax Link to come closer," Steve ventured to say, after listening patiently to Toby's staggering explanation; "but tell us how you expect to trap the monk after you've got him close in? I take it that's goin' to be the job that'll make us think we're up against a stone wall."

"I saw Toby practicing with a piece of old rope

this afternoon, throwing a lariat, and I bet you now he's meaning to try and drop a loop over the head of that Link," Bandy-legs asserted.

Max shook his head as though the idea did not find much favor with him.

"A regular cow-puncher might manage to do it," he remarked, "but no bungler like any one of us would be. That trick monkey is too quick and smart to let a noose fall over his head while he's awake. You'd see him duck every time, and slip off, chattering like a parrot. You'll have to try something better than a lariat, Toby, if you hope to trap a wideawake monkey."

"Oh! well, I've been h-h-hammering my h-h-head all the while," Toby explained, "and I've fixed up a lot of g-g-good schemes that I'd like to try out. Once we g-g-get him to understand that there are n-n-nuts around here, and he ain't goin' to desert us in a h-h-hurry; so I'll have a c-c-chance to sample 'em all."

"How about to-night; think it'll pay to rig that rope snare again, and bait it with some of the nuts?" asked Steve, who was rapidly becoming quite interested in the game, which appealed to his sporting instincts more and more the deeper he allowed himself to be drawn into it.

"I expected to," admitted Toby.

"We might set a number of the rope snares," suggested Bandy-legs, "so that if he missed connections with one he'd get stuck in another.

They could all be connected with that stout hickory stick; or mebbe we might find others just as full of spring."

Max agreed that at least it would do no harm.

"All the same," he went on to tell Toby, "if I was you I wouldn't expect too much from that spring trap, no matter how many snares you set. If that smart monkey really put that stick in the noose, and set it off for fun, or in spite, chances are you'll never trap him that way. He knows too much about tricks and all that. But we'll give the thing another try-out to-night, and if it doesn't work we'd better change off to something else."

Accordingly all of them became very busy for some time. It was found that they could fasten two other cords to the same bent sapling, making a regular network of nooses, among which they scattered some of the nut meat which the circus man had brought along with him, knowing the weakness of the missing animal for the same.

"Whew! if he eats up all that and doesn't get caught, I'll believe he's sure a close relation of the Old Nick," Steve gave as his opinion, after this labor had been completed, and they surveyed the trap with complacency.

Toby was very enthusiastic. He declared that he felt it in his bones they would be awakened by a screaming and scolding, to find poor old Link dangling in mid-air, gripped by the hind leg in one of those entangling nooses. He even went so far

as to arrange the stout collar, with its padlock and chain, which Mr. Jenks had left with them before going back, so as to have it handy in case of sudden need.

None of them slept very soundly, even Toby, who as a rule could be depended on to get his full share of rest. Not that there was any wild alarm, for the night crept on and everything remained peaceful enough; but all of the boys felt more or less excitement; and upon being awakened by some dream would lie there listening, and occasionally peeping out from the upturned flap of the tent.

The fire smouldered, and went out, for no one ventured to replenish the exhausted fuel; and during the last section of the night there was not even a spark remaining; only the cold moon above to dispel the darkness.

Then came morning, and as Bandy-legs aroused them all with his kicking to get free from his blanket, which seemed to be twisted around his neck, while his feet were chilled, they thought it best to start another day.

Toby of course was out as soon as he could get some clothes on. He had expressed himself as keenly disappointed because there had been no sign of the trap being sprung; but shortly after he went out to investigate, the others heard him coming back on the jump.

"Sounds like he's found signs to tell that Link

did pay us a call,'' suggested Steve, rightly guessing why Toby should manifest so much excitement.

He proved to be a true prophet, for Toby, as soon as he reached them, burst out with his lament.

''What d'ye think, he's been and d-d-done it, fellers? Say, there isn't a c-c-crumb of all that nut meat left; but he stepped over every n-n-noose as neat as you p-p-please. My stars! but he's a c-c-corker. G-g-guess they make him walk on the tops of a h-h-hundred bottles in the c-c-circus. He c'n do it easy, g-g-give you my word for it. He's a w-w-wonder, that's what he is. Whew! means I've g-g-got to do some more high thinkin' if I expect to g-g-grab that Link. But I will, if I have to p-p-play hookey from school, and s-s-stay up here right along!''

Upon investigation it was found that the clever simian had indeed managed to pass in and out amidst that network of waiting loops without displacing even one of the same. Every crumb of the nut meat had vanished, too, showing how careful the sly rascal had been, and cleaned up as he went.

Bandy-legs suggested that perhaps woods rats might have done the trick, or even chipmunks or red squirrels; whereupon a close examination disclosed the plain imprints of the monkey's feet in numerous places, which proved the identity of the culprit beyond any dispute.

Max was highly amused at the outcome, for he always liked to find himself pitted against a worthy antagonist. He seldom felt like exerting himself when the game was not worth the candle. He liked to cast a fly for bass, and having deceived them with a feathery lure, play them with a slender rod and fine line, giving them the sportsman's chance to get free if only they knew how to jump out of the water and throw themselves across the taut line.

It began to look as though the boys had found a foeman worthy of their steel in this sly trick monkey; and they would possibly have all the fun they could want during the balance of their little Easter outing, in trying to outwit him.

From time to time during that day they talked matters over. Toby was not left alone in the endeavor to invent some scheme whereby Link might be caught. Steve hatched up one that they determined to try that same night. It was to dig a pit, cover it skillfully with a delicate mattress that, when sprinkled with earth would seem to be perfectly sound; but which was calculated to give way, once a weight of thirty pounds or more had embarked on the covering.

With high hopes, then, they carefully baited this trap just before retiring to the interior of the tent. Toby, always sanguine, was confident that it was going to work. He had told long stories as they sat around the camp fire, about how hunters of big game, sent out by those who dealt in wild animals,

always used this trap in the shape of a pit in order to secure various species that could not be caught in their lion and tiger nets.

They had slept so poorly of late that once they did manage to forget things the entire four boys slumbered heavily for several hours. Any ordinary noise would not have awakened Toby when at home; indeed, his folks had threatened to get a patent bed that, connected with clock-work machinery, would throw him out on the floor at a certain hour arranged for. But he had something on his mind now, and hence when there suddenly arose a tremendous squealing and crashing, Toby was up on his feet as quickly as any of his three chums.

"Whoop! hurrah! we've g-g-got him at last, fellers! Quick, let's hurry and k-k-keep the beggar from c-c-climbing out again! Oh! joy! D-d-didn't he make an awful r-r-row, though? Listen to him, would you? P-p-please hurry, Bandy-legs; you're as s-s-slow as molasses in winter!"

Not stopping to even pull on their shoes they all hastened to reach the outer air, and rush toward the spot where the pit had been dug.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LAST CAMP FIRE—CONCLUSION

"Ain't he a squealer, though?" cried Steve, as they came close to the place, and saw that the thin mattress had indeed been broken down.

The sounds welled up from the hole they had dug, and there was some sort of movement down there.

"Oh! let's h-h-hurry and g-g-get him fastened to this chain!" Toby was crying. "He might j-j-jump out any minute unless we're c-c-careful. Max, have you thought about the l-l-lantern like you said you would?"

"It's here, all right," replied the other; "now, surround the pit, while I light up, so we can see how to get the old sinner out."

Accordingly they formed what Steve called "a hollow square" around the hole in the ground, out of which was coming that series of discordant squeals; but in Toby's ears no music could ever sound sweeter, for did they not mean a clever victory over the shrewdest of wild animals, an educated monkey?

Max had matches along, for a box had been fastened to the lantern, so that no unnecessary delay might be encountered should they want to do things in haste, and light was needed.

When he had applied one of these to the wick, and turned down the globe, Max swung the lantern around, and then held it over the edge of the pit very cautiously, for fear lest he further excite the occupant.

Then they all stared down, expecting to see a shrinking monkey looking helplessly up at them, cowed by his capture. The squealing had suddenly ceased as the lantern light began to fall into the hole; they could already distinguish a form in the pit; and just then a plain, unmistakable *grunt* smote their ears.

"Oh! my s-s-stars!" gasped Toby, plainly astounded and disgusted.

Steve gave a shout, and then laughed with all his might.

"Why, what's this?" exclaimed Bandy-legs, looking again, "only a plain old *hog* instead of a chattering monk? Say, this is a good one on us, fellers. Has it been this rooter and grunter that's been bothering us right along? Somebody kick me, won't you, please?"

Thereupon Steve accommodated him without the slightest hesitation.

"Oh! this is only one of those accidents that will happen sometimes," Max went on to explain. "We know it wasn't a pig that did all the other mischief, for we saw the tracks as plain as day. To-night it just came about that this porker, escaped from some farmer's pen, wandered into camp, and found those nice nuts and other stuff

that we piled up on the cover of the pit. So he started to have a midnight lunch all by himself, but the ice was too thin, and down he went."

Even Toby had to laugh by that time, having partly recovered from his grievous disappointment.

"Ain't this the greatest little puzzle we ever tackled?" Bandy-legs was heard to say; "and now that we've got something in our trap, why don't you use that chain and padlock, Toby? Here's a prize pet for you. Think of fastenin' the same up in your back yard, and tellin' folks you had a wild boar in captivity. Regular side-show freak business you might go into."

The imprisoned hog had started in to squeal once more. Perhaps it imagined the critical time in its life had arrived, when hams and loins were in demand, and that it must maintain the reputation of its species for making a row.

"But great Cæsar's ghost! what ought we do about it?" exclaimed Steve, clapping both hands over his ears; "we can't stand for this all night long."

"We must manage to get him out of that, some way or other," Max declared, positively.

"Toby, you're so fond of everything that walks on four legs, s'pose you climb down into the pit and lift Mr. Hog out?" suggested Bandy-legs.

"What, me, and with only my p-p-pajamas on?" cried Toby; "I'd like to s-s-see myself adoin' that. Seems to me the b-b-best way would be to dig

a trench, and then shoo the old p-p-porker out."

"That's what we'll do," Max announced. "It would seem that the monkey is too smart to step into a trap built like this, so we wouldn't have any further need of the pit. Let's get some clothes on first, so we won't take cold, and then everybody dig."

It was a duty they could not shirk, and before long they had managed to knock away part of the wall of the pit, so that an ordinary hog might manage to scramble up the incline from the depths.

Then they all gathered on the other side, and "shooed," and waved their arms as well as the lantern. The prisoner of the pit, alarmed no doubt for his safety, and seeing an opening for escape, started to climb, with such success that presently he reached level ground, gave a satisfied grunt, and then trotted off into the neighboring woods.

The four boys were laughing among themselves as they once more went back to the warmth of their blankets.

"Another dream shattered," said Steve, "and count me out after this when it comes to hatching up dark schemes against that poor ape. Some of the rest of you can try your hands if you want; but ten to one we'll have to get down to hard gravel in the end, and use that wild-animal-catcher stunt with the doped stuff. To tell you the truth I'm sort of hoping we will, because I'd like to see how it works."

"M-m-me too, Steve!" exclaimed Toby; "and I only h-h-hope Max says the word after we've tried a few more games, and find they don't w-w-work any."

"I'll fix the limit for another night," said Max, and then if we haven't been successful in trapping the monkey I'll agree to try Mr. Jenks' plan."

With that all of the others declared they would rest content, though it seemed as though Bandy-legs, as well as Steve and Toby, was willing to proceed to extremes as soon as possible, only Max objecting to the plan as hardly fair to the monkey.

Another day passed, and they amused themselves in various ways, taking pictures, fishing for pickerel in the big pond with fair success, and making arrangements for trying out another idea that night, in hopes of capturing the smart monkey.

This consisted of a trap fashioned somewhat on the order of the turkey cage mentioned by Toby. It was built of stout canes, carried all the way from the pond, and with the corner joints spliced with cord. Then a descending roadway was carefully dug out, and brought up inside the cage. A trigger was arranged, to be sprung should the monkey, in following the roadway, enter the cage, and which would release a little door that, falling into place, would shut the opening, and at the same time ring a bell Toby had fixed close to where his head would be as he slept.

Altogether it was quite an ingenious contrap-

tion; but all the same there was no bell ringing during *that* night. And yet when Toby went out next morning to examine his disappointing contrivance he reported that the monkey had actually been there, and eaten up all the nut meat, even going inside the trap, and never setting the trigger off.

Sure enough they did find his tracks in the roadway as far as the trap, but no further, which told them the animal was too smart to be caught by such a flimsy device.

Toby insisted on it that he had gone inside, because the bait had all vanished; but Max, having lifted the cage aside, showed that there was not a sign of the monkey's footprints there. On the other hand he told them the inside bait had plainly been devoured by little mice, for he showed them innumerable tracks made by their dainty feet.

So Toby declared that he was done.

"He's too cute for m-m-me, fellers, I admit," he said; "though if it wasn't for that fetching bait left by Mr. Jenks I'd k-k-keep on tryin' till I didn't know my own name. But now, Max, l-l-let's g-g-get busy in earnest."

As he had promised them, Max would not draw back. The balance of the nut meat and some of the dried bread he put in a pannikin, and poured a portion of the contents of the bottle over the mess, until the liquid was soaked up.

This was done at a certain spot where they believed the monkey was most apt to show him-

self. Then the boys went away, one of them remaining on sentry duty at some little distance off, so as to give the signal should Link make his appearance.

The whole morning passed without the monkey showing up. Lunch had been served, and the one on duty relieved, so that he could take his turn at the rude table they had constructed near the tent.

Bandy-legs was the sentinel now, and would remain on post until about the middle of the afternoon, unless something happened to break the dreadful monotony.

It did.

About two o'clock Bandy-legs came running in, all out of breath, with the exciting news that the monkey had appeared, just as they hoped, and was even then busily engaged in disposing of the doped food as greedily as anything.

So they all trooped out to witness the strange sight. Toby carried along the chain and collar and padlock left in his charge by the showman; for he kept hoping that the time had now come when he might find a good use for the same.

True enough, they discovered the big monkey busily at work. His liking for strong drink was apt to prove his undoing, even as it has that of countless millions of the human race. Watching him eating like a starving thing, the boys exchanged many humorous remarks.

By the time Link had appeased his appetite he could hardly stand up straight, and Max declared

there was now no longer any reason why they should not surround and capture him.

It was almost too easy after all. The stupid beast made no attempt to flee, for he staggered whenever he tried to move. He also seemed to understand his condition, for at their approach he held out one hand toward them pitifully, as though seeking their assistance to guide his faltering footsteps.

And so the exulting Toby quickly fixed that collar around his neck, snapped the little padlock shut, and gripping the chain led the way to camp, followed by the others, with Steve holding one of the poor monkey's hands, and Max the other.

That was the story of Link's downfall and capture. The evening following he sat there, secured to a tree, and holding his head between his hands as though it ached terribly, and blinked at the boys whenever they approached; but with not even a whimper of complaint, just a little moan at times.

In the morning the monkey seemed to be all right again, and full of comical antics. And after that Toby spent about all his time hovering around the place where Link was chained, talking to him, coaxing him to show off by tempting pieces of food, and enjoying himself more than words could tell.

Their vacation was drawing to a close, and while they had not met with any really thrilling adventures, still the four chums were a unit in declaring that they had never had a better time.

A deep mystery had been solved, and they had caught the monkey which was to net them such a dazzling reward. Max had become reconciled to the means employed, as it was all for the beast's own good; and Link himself, apparently had forgotten that there was such a thing as freedom.

When the time came for them to break camp, they took down the khaki-colored tent with the customary sad rites, chanting in unison the chorus of "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground."

They were a merry lot as they started the old horse homeward, and with the captive monkey in their midst to keep them company. They had to maintain a watch on Link, for he was apt to pinch them, snatch anything he could see, from a watch to a lead pencil, and was as full of his pranks "as an egg is of meat," as Steve said.

When they arrived home Max hastened to wire Mr. Jenks of their success, and on the very next train the delighted circus man appeared in Carson, to claim the valuable runaway, and gladly turned over the two hundred dollars to the chums.

What that represented to Max and his three mates in paying the expenses of the next great outing they planned will be told in the next story of this series, to be called "Afloat on the Flood."

Until we meet again in the pages of that volume we will have to bid the boys of Carson good-bye for a short time, shake hands with the reader, and turn down the light.

THE END

V.

MORTIMER HALLECK'S ADVENTURE.

Among the many adventurous incidents of our frontier life in northwest Iowa, fifteen years ago, I recall one that befell a boy neighbor, Mortimer Halleck, in which his recklessness came very near causing his death.

There were five of us boys, who formed a little company of tried friends and pledged comrades. We hunted, trapped, boated, went skating and swimming together, and, when the first frame school-house was built, we occupied the two back seats, on the boys' side.

In our hunts after deer, wolves, badgers, and feathered game, we found an exhilaration such as I never again expect to experience in the tamer pursuits of life. We even felt an exultant joy in the fierce buffeting of the winter blizzards which annually descended upon us from the plateaus of Dakota.

During the regular season of bird migration, the resounding *golunk, golunk,* of the wild goose, the shrill *klil-la-la* of the swift and wary brant, the affectionate *qu-a-a-rr-k, quack* of the Mallard drake and his mate, with the strange, inimitable cry of the whooping crane, combined to form a sylvan orchestra, the music of which thrilled us with more pleasurable sensations than were ever awakened by the household organ or the town brass band of later years.

In the early spring, during the alternate slush, mud and freeze of the first thaws, there always occurred a

short vacation from school and work, in which we gathered a harvest of fun, fur and feathers.

At this season, the low, flat valleys of the Little Sioux and the Ocheyedan rivers were covered six or eight feet deep by the annual overflow; and torrents of yellow snow-water, the melting of tremendous drifts, rushed down creeks and ravines.

As soon as these impetuous currents had gathered force enough to upheave the thick layers of ice in the river-beds and break over the banks out came beaver, musk-rat and mink, driven from house and hole to take refuge upon the masses of ice and drift stuff which lodged in the thickets of tall willows that grew along the beds of these streams. Here they were obliged to stay until the water subsided, and here they often fell a prey to the rifle or shot-gun of the hunter.

We owned three boats in common; and as the men of the settlement were not particularly busy during the freshet season, we could easily persuade or hire them to load our skiffs on their wagons, and haul us eight or ten miles up the Sioux or Ocheyedan, for half a day's run down home, in which scarcely the stroke of an oar was necessary, after getting out into the main channel. Floating leisurely down, we were able to hunt musk-rat, geese and ducks, which were plentiful on the water or on the banks.

Beaver were scarce, but we occasionally got one. A mink or two, a couple of dozen musk-rats, and a goodly bag of feathered game were often the result of a half-day's run with a single boat.

Mortimer Halleck, who at this time lived in the fork of the rivers, and at a considerable distance from the rest of us, owned a staunch skiff, which he had

himself made, and in it went often alone upon the rivers. It was upon one of these solitary trips that he met with the adventure mentioned.

On a raw afternoon in March, his father had taken Mortimer and his boat on his double horse wagon six miles up stream. At this point there was a great bend in the river, and, by crossing the neck, the water distance to the fork was lengthened to fifteen miles. Mortimer was thus set afloat with his boat, with a long afternoon's run on the river before him.

For several hours the young hunter allowed his boat to drift down with the current, then swollen to an unusual height. His eyes, roving on either hand, were now and then rewarded with the sight of a small brown bunch of fur, resting on a bit of lodged drift. Then followed a quick puff of smoke, and the echoing report from the shot-gun. The troubles of the furry little chap were at an end. The kinks would straighten out of its small humped back, and, as a deft turn of the oars brought the boat alongside, the hunter's hand would reach over the edge, grasp the long, slim tail, and fling the body of the sleek little *musquash* into the boat.

Twice during the afternoon a flock of geese had ventured low down over the drifting boatman, and each time one of the flock had fallen a victim. The others had hurried away in noisy confusion. He had hardly expected to find beaver, yet as the night drew on without a sight of one, he felt a little disappointed. True, he had secured a profitable lot of game: two geese, a mink, and more than a dozen muskrats.

But he wanted to show a beaver with the rest of his bag, and he had about given up his hopes of it when,

just as the sun was setting and while he was passing down the mid channel between two long lines of clustering willow thickets, he espied the very object of his desires directly ahead and within easy range.

The animal was rolled up in a rusty brown ball, lying in a snug nest amid the bushy sprouts from an elm stub which projected three or four feet above the water. The tree had been broken off, and leaned out from the summer banks of the river. It had grown, as elm stumps often do, a dense fringe of short, tangled brush about the end of the trunk. Among these sprouts the beaver had fashioned a nest, and was lying curled up, asleep when Mortimer, drifting silently down within short range, raised his gun and shot at it.

But the beaver is a "hard-lived" animal, and, even when shot at such close quarters, will quite frequently flop off its perch into the water, and, clutching with teeth and claws into roots or grass at the bottom, remain there. In that case, the hunter's ammunition is simply wasted.

This had happened more than once in Mortimer's experience, and, fearing that it might happen again, for he saw the beaver floundering heavily in its nest, he brought the boat about in great haste, circled around the stump, and jammed the bow into the sprouts. He then dropped the oars, and sprang forward to secure the game.

His haste was unfortunate; for, though he grasped at the small limbs quickly enough to have held the boat in place if it had not been in motion, his impetus was so great that the unsteady skiff recoiled backward with a force that pitched him over the prow, upon the very top of the stub. He lurched off to one side, and

his feet and legs splashed into the water; but he escaped a complete ducking by clenching the top of the trunk with his left arm, while with his right hand he grasped *one foot of the beaver!* And then he glanced around for his boat.

It was gone, and had left him in a most perilous situation. The light skiff, impelled by the force of his

Mortimer looked after it in utter dismay.—Page 58.

fall out of it, had floated back into the current, and was already more than a dozen yards out, moving down stream.

Mortimer looked after it in utter dismay.

It was now too late to make a swim for it; he could never live in that strong, icy current long enough to reach it.

With a few cautious hitches he succeeded in gaining a ticklish seat upon the broken top of the stump, where

he maintained himself by resting his feet upon two of the stoutest sprouts. Seated thus, he could feel an unsteady quivering of the trunk, a trembling, wrenching motion, that told, but too plainly, of the powerful force of the flood, and of the uncertain tenure which he possessed on even this comfortless refuge.

The lad was now thoroughly alarmed, and surveyed his surroundings with a growing fear that gained not a ray of hope from the prospect. The situation was truly a grave one.

On all sides was the hurrying flow of the grim, dark waters, which rushed swirling and eddying onward, The current swashed dismally among the slender. swaying willows, on either side; and beyond these, he knew that there was at least three hundred yards of swimming depth before either shore could be reached.

If any one should happen to pass, he could not, from the land, see Mortimer, on account of the willows. The nearest house was three or four miles distant; and a voice could be heard but a little distance, above the swash of the flood and the rush of the cold wind.

Mortimer's parents did not expect him to return until late in the evening, and they would probably make no effort to learn of his whereabouts until after midnight. The night, too, was already growing very cold, with a raw, gusty wind that soughed drearily among the willows; his bare hands and wet feet were fast becoming chilled and numb.

All the desolation, helplessness and misery of the situation were forced upon him by that keen and merciless power of reflection which so often attacks the mind in moments of extreme peril or of sudden disaster.

He saw but too plainly that it was useless to look for rescue before morning, and, clinging there to his bleak and uncertain perch, he felt that he would assuredly chill to death in a few hours.

Looking out into the gloom of the coming dusk, with the long, black, freezing night staring him in the face, tears gathered in the poor fellow's eyes, and a lump of choking misery rose up in his throat. Yet he was a brave fellow, who had never been known to yield an inch before any danger which must be met, when the balance of probabilities was adjusted with any degree of fairness. In this case, the probabilities were all on one side, and that side was against him.

"There just aint any chance for me at all," he groaned, at length. "I'm in a much worse predicament than the beaver and muskrats; for if they do get killed, it's so sudden they don't know it, but I've got to die by inches. I've just got to sit here and freeze a little at a time, till I fall off and finish life by drowning."

A wretched enough prospect! Yet that was the fate which seemed certainly awaiting him. Wet as he was, and already shivering, with no chance for exercise, there seemed little chance of surviving the cold, dismal night.

Sitting in hopeless suffering, he peered about him again and again in the gathering darkness, in the vain hope of discovering something that could give him an atom of comfort. Then, whipping his numbed hands about his shoulders until they tingled, he attemped to remove his soaked and stiffening boots; but, owing to his shaky and uncertain seat, he was baffled in this effort also.

Then, with feet and legs growing every moment more numb, he sat, clinging with one hand to the stump, whipping the other, shouting at intervals, and waiting for—he dared not think what.

An hour passed; then another; dumb, dreary despair had settled upon his mind. Insensibly he fell into a half-frozen stupor. He was beginning to think, in a numb way, that it did not make any particular difference to him what happened now.

An hour or more dragged by thus sluggishly, then a sudden shock, accompanied by a grinding noise, threw him partly off the stump. Instinctively he clutched the sprouts with his chilled fingers, but slid down, expecting to sink in the cold waters.

But he struck something solid and white. It was a large ice-cake, which had come floating down the river and touched the elm stump. The jar of his fall roused the boy; he staggered to his feet, feeling *strange* in his head, and with queer and painful sensations about the arms and shoulders.

He tried to step, but at first it seemed as if his feet must be frozen; yet, after stamping about for a few minutes, they began to lose their feeling of lumpishness and to prickle.

He then sat down upon the ice, and, after a struggle, worked off his boots, squeezed the water from his socks, and chafed and pounded his feet until they felt alive. This done, he got up and looked around; and hope revived within him.

The ice-cake was a large and solid one, twenty feet across at least; and, owing to the falling of the river, it was floating down the centre of the channel. He

was, at least, floating toward home; and there was room to stamp about and keep from freezing.

Mortimer's spirits rose with the renewed circulation of the blood. He shouted, beat his arms about his chest, he even danced, the better to warm himself up again.

It seemed to him now that he was being guided by fate. He then became confused in mind—dazed, as it were. In odd vagary, as his ice-raft floated on down the river, he peopled the darkness about him with imaginary foes, and "squared off" at them pugnaciously. His blood warming with this exercise, he began delivering in grandiloquent tones the address which he had declaimed at school, when a voice from the darkness near at hand brought him back to his situation.

"Mortimer!"

"Halloo!" he answered.

"Mortimer, is it *you*?"

"Is that you, father?" cried the young castaway, "have you got a boat?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Halleck; "but we have been alarmed. What has kept—"

"Paddle your skiff this way, father. Here, this way; I'm on a cake of ice."

"On a cake of ice!" cried Mr. Halleck. "I knew you were in some trouble. What has happened? I borrowed Neighbor Wescott's boat, and was going to cross over to see if you were at Morley's with Pete, when I heard your voice."

Mortimer was astonished to find he had already drifted so far.

"How much longer could you have stood it?" Mr. Halleck asked, in tones that trembled a little.

"Not another half-hour," Mortimer declared, and probably he was right.

Next day he succeeded in finding his boat, safely lodged among some willows; but the beaver was missing, having probably been jarred off the nest on the stub by the ice-cake striking against it.

The river had lowered considerably, and Mortimer, while searching for his boat, saw numerous ice-rafts moving down the channel; yet he could not repress a conviction that something more than mere good fortune had directed the ice-cake to touch at his bleak and comfortless perch in the nick of time to save his life.